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**MAKING PUBLIC SPACE:
COMMUNITY GROUPS AND LOCAL
PARTICIPATION IN STOKE-ON-
TRENT**

Thesis submitted for PhD

Geography Department

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The Open University

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Contents	page
Abstract	<i>vii</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>ix</i>
Preface	1
Chapter One: Questioning public space	
1.1 Introduction	7
1.2 Policy and the public	11
1.3 Publics, counterpublics and 'difference'	28
1.4 The public and the private	34
1.5 Spaces of the public	39
1.6 'Material' and emergent spaces?	46
1.7 Conclusions: a framework for public space	52
Chapter Two: Methodology	
2.1 Introduction	57
2.2 Choosing ethnography	60
2.3 Locating fieldwork and negotiating access	73
2.4 Interviews and contextual fieldwork	81
2.5 Fieldwork with Riverlands and Westfields	84
2.6 Analysis and writing up	103
2.7 Conclusions	108
Chapter Three: The public and the state: Stoke-on-Trent	
3.1 Introduction	111
3.2 Researching local government	112

3.3 The public and regeneration in Stoke-on-Trent	118
3.4 Policy and modes of publicness	137
3.5 Spaces of 'public participation'	150
3.6 Conclusions	164
Chapter Four: Experiencing the neighbourhood	
4.1 Introduction	169
4.2 The politics of the neighbourhood	171
4.3 Introducing Riverlands and Westfields	179
4.4 Thriving places?	182
4.5 'Little Beirut'	188
4.6 Places with problems?	201
4.7 Talking to the neighbours	207
4.8 Conclusions	217
Chapter Five: The everyday spaces of the groups	
5.1 Introduction	219
5.2 Riverlands	224
5.3 Westfields	256
5.4 Conclusions: public spaces?	286
Chapter Six: Spaces of performance and occasion	
6.1 Introduction	291
6.2 Spaces of 'politics'	296
6.3 Spaces of celebration	313
6.4 Conclusions	326
Chapter Seven: Conclusions	
7.1 Learning lessons	329
7.2 The spatialities of the public	331

7.3 The public and the private	334
7.4 Public spaces and 'difference'	339
7.5 The public and the state	342
7.6 Sustaining public spaces?	347
Appendix: fieldwork activity	355
References	359

Abstract

This thesis is based on ethnographic research with two small community groups on housing estates in Stoke-on-Trent, UK. It explores how their work produces certain kinds of 'public space', understood as spaces that bring together local people and generate potential for new forms of interaction and collective action. This analysis is informed by theoretical writing around the nature of public space, as well as a context of government policy and programmes that seek to reconstitute the public in particular modes. The work of the groups is also understood as shaped by the dynamics of the neighbourhoods, which both open up and limit possibilities for such projects. The thesis argues for the importance of the 'everyday' spaces of the groups, made through informal modes of socialising, and activities such as play sessions with children, cooking and gardening. An emphasis on these 'ordinary' spaces and the practices which produce them, including shared practical activities, runs counter to a tendency in some academic writing to view public spaces as highly visible or symbolic spaces of struggle between different groups or interests. Instead the spaces focused on are made through low-key, incremental negotiations over time, and suggest ways in which small-scale, but nonetheless significant, connections between different groups might take place. The spaces are also made in ways that connect conventionally 'public' and 'private' or domestic spheres, and that are intertwined with the interventions of government. The thesis therefore provides insights into the nature of public space, collective action and democracy in such contexts.

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Preface

The questions shaping my thesis spring from concerns and issues arising from my professional experiences working in urban policy and with community groups. Here I intend to try and set out how these issues came into focus for me personally, before setting out the more specific questions that I will explore in the thesis, and providing an outline of how I will answer them.

Between 1998 and 2002 I worked initially as a freelance arts manager for community arts organisations in East London (see Jupp 2000), and then full-time for the Architecture Foundation, a non-profit organisation seeking to engage the public with issues around the built environment through outreach and education projects. Whilst there I focused on projects working with residents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, engaging local people in regeneration schemes. I was involved in particular with setting up a new national advisory service, a joint project with the National Tenants Resource Centre to assist residents' associations and community groups who wanted to initiate small-scale projects in the outdoor spaces of their localities, such as new play areas, parks or community facilities.¹ I also developed a strong interest in urban policy, and spent six months on a secondment to a central government cross-departmental policy team, looking at improving the quality of urban public spaces.²

¹ See www.architecturefoundation.org.uk, and www.theglasshouse.org.uk for information on the advisory service.

² See ODPM 2002 for the outcomes of this review.

Throughout this time, and whilst working on policy issues in particular, I often found myself arguing for the broad value and importance of urban public spaces. However my own arguments tended to feel ill-defined and hazy and, in the government context especially, somehow not robust enough to stand up against what were seen as priorities such as health and education. I saw that where 'public space' as an explicit issue was being addressed by the government it tended to be through tackling particular concerns such as crime or litter. Yet I felt instinctively that I wanted to advocate the importance of a broader social, cultural and political sphere, rather than just a focus on fear of crime or concerns about cleanliness. I was interested in the potentials of urban public spaces to generate new forms of interaction and collective action, but it was hard to articulate these concerns within the parameters of the policy discourses within which my own work was situated.

This was against the background of urban regeneration programmes which on the one hand are bringing new cultural and social life to urban spaces in city centres, mostly linked to consumption and leisure practices for those that can afford them (Shields 1992; Zukin 1991,1995). On the other hand, separate programmes seek to deal with a myriad of issues and problems in 'disadvantaged neighbourhoods', often large areas of social housing (Power 1997). My own experience of these programmes was that whilst well-intentioned they were often ineffective, becoming mired in bureaucracy, forms of local politics, and inadequately thought-out programmes of community involvement. Ultimately I felt that such programmes lacked the funding, time and power to address the long-term

economic and social issues within these areas. Overall there appeared to be little cross-over between these two modes of regeneration, and indeed the latter has become known as 'neighbourhood renewal' (Social Exclusion Unit 1998). It seemed that solely in city centres was any attempt being made to improve and develop urban public spaces, as part of economic growth strategies and the 'marketing' of localities (Loftman & Nevin 2003; Madanipour 1999).

In all this the only places where I saw changes taking place that seemed to benefit people living in poverty was when local people had got together in community groups or residents' associations to organise projects themselves. Through involvement at the National Tenants Resource Centre in particular, I was struck by the energy and optimism generated by initiatives led by local residents, which often seemed to move forward in spite of, not because of, local government, whatever the rhetoric around 'community participation' and involvement (Taylor 2003). I became aware of the complex and often fraught dynamics around such processes, which involved clashes of culture, perspective, and forms of knowledge, as professional service providers and agencies came up against the concerns of local people and groups. Indeed as part of a 'professional' organisation myself, the question of how to effectively support such local activists was an ongoing one.

Both of these sets of issues, around urban public space more broadly and around the dynamics of urban change in deprived areas in particular, are framed by the same fundamental concerns about interaction and collective

action in contemporary cities, although when I began my PhD research I wasn't clear how to express these concerns. However, through beginning to read around the topic of public space I came to frame a set of questions which could be expressed as follows:

- What kind of potentials do urban public spaces have? How do material spaces relate to a broader sense of the public realm? What kinds of public spaces include the least powerful and most marginalised groups in cities?

From these questions I came to focus on the idea of small community groups or residents' associations in deprived areas, and to ask more specific questions:

- Do locally-initiated projects, by small community groups, offer ways to develop new forms of public space? How do these relate to government-led attempts to bring about change?

Therefore throughout my research I used the framework of 'public space' to explore the spaces and practices of the groups I worked with, and in particular to consider what forms of interaction and collective action they enable. I also came to consider the versions of public space produced by community groups within the contexts of other forms of public space that they might have access to or which affected them.

As I will discuss in more detail over the opening chapters of the thesis, I focused in particular on two small community groups in Stoke-on-Trent, UK, in neighbourhoods which I call Westfields and Riverlands, both areas of mostly local authority, or ex-local authority, housing on the edges of the city. The living environments and social and economic issues in the

neighbourhoods are characteristic of many 'disadvantaged' areas. Both community groups consist of a core of committee members with networks of volunteers, and both were initiated and remain strongly led by local people. The groups run a range of projects and activities locally, aimed broadly at improving residents' lives in the neighbourhoods. They operate in various spaces around the localities, but significantly, the groups are both based in 'community houses', council-owned houses given to them on a rent-free basis.

My analysis of the work of these two groups as producing certain kinds of public space forms the centre of my argument over the course of the thesis, although I also spend time setting out the contexts in which the groups operated. It is worth noting here that such an analysis did not develop from a pre-determined theoretical position. Rather I came to draw on new conceptual and theoretical resources as my fieldwork progressed and I found it difficult to 'fit' the emergent material into the concepts I had garnered from my initial reading. Indeed, as should be apparent from my discussion in Chapter One, my analysis involved moving away from some of the literature directly associated with the topic of 'public space', to draw on wider discussions of spatialities and forms of politics.

Therefore to provide a more specific outline of what will follow:

- In Chapter One I discuss both policy-orientated and theoretical debates which I wish to draw on in considering the nature of the public and public spaces. From this I draw out an analytical 'framework' through which to discuss public space in the rest of the thesis.

- In Chapter Two I discuss my methodology, which was centrally ethnography, and explore how this approach shaped my emergent analysis of the fieldwork.
- In Chapter Three I begin to focus on the context of Stoke-on-Trent. Here I am interested in how the 'public' of Stoke is understood by government and agency officials, and specifically its role in economic and social development projects. These understandings are mediated by both national and local discourses and imaginings and have important implications for the work of the two community groups.
- In Chapter Four I explore the dynamics of the two neighbourhoods in which the groups are based, and the various senses of the 'public' that circulate within them. Again these senses generate both positive potentials and limits to what the groups themselves can achieve.
- Chapters Five and Six consist of the analysis of ethnographic material from my time with the two groups. In order to think about the distinctive ways in which they produce public space through their activities I divide these up into 'everyday' or ongoing spaces, and 'occasions' or performances. These different types of space bring the groups into different sets of relations with both the realm of local government interventions and the dynamics of their neighbourhoods.
- Finally in the Conclusion I draw out some theoretical and more practical implications of the research.

Chapter One

Questioning public space

1.1 Introduction

I hope that the Preface has begun to give a sense of why and how I intend to use the framework of 'public space' to explore interactions and spaces within my fieldwork context. However, the term 'public', and by extension related ideas of the 'public sphere' or 'public realm', are notoriously slippery. Warner (2002: 29) lists fifteen distinct ways in which the word might be employed. Both Robbins (1993b) and Fraser (1993) argue that debate around the nature of the public is made more difficult by the fact that the term may be understood in different ways by different voices within such debate. In particular, the extent to which 'the public' is associated with state administration, or with an entity quite separate from the state, more like 'civil society', can result in the conflation of different, even opposing ideological positions. However, whilst such complexity may make it a difficult term to use precisely, the notion of 'the public' does seem to capture a series of overlapping issues which are central to the development of democratic and just societies. Although Robbins (1993: x) notes many ways in which the concept is problematic, he also powerfully suggests that it is essential to left-wing discourses:

In radical struggles over architecture, urban planning, sculpture, political theory, ecology, economics, education, the media, and

public health, to mention only a few sites among others, the public has long served as a rallying cry against private greed, a demand for attention to the general welfare as against propertied interests, an appeal for openness to scrutiny as opposed to corporate and bureaucratic secrecy, an arena in which disenfranchised minorities struggle to express their cultural identity, a code word for socialism. Without this discursive weapon, we seem to enter such struggles inadequately armed.

Arguably, the idea of the public becomes even more hazy in relation to public spaces, which are often primarily understood, at least outside academic writing, only in terms of physical outdoor spaces. Despite this, issues around open-ness and civil association are often implied, even if only in the background, when such spaces are discussed.³ However, as I will go on to emphasise, if we are interested in something more than the physical characteristics of certain kinds of spaces, in other words in their social and democratic potential, then we need to focus more closely on what it means to describe or imagine a space as 'public'. For my own purposes, rather than proposing a definition of public space at this stage, I am hoping that a sense of what I see as the issues at stake will emerge from the key ideas and debates explored over the course of this chapter. These constitute theoretical resources that will allow me to ask questions and develop analysis of the fieldwork material in the chapters that follow.

³ For example, the recently established UK government agency promoting the importance of 'public space', CABI Space, works on issues around parks, streets and squares. Their website (www.cabispaces.org.uk) states, 'Parks and other public spaces are for everyone, places to live and breathe, walk and run, rest or play. They are where we meet together, where we stop to reflect, where we revive our spirits'. I will return to discuss recent policy initiatives such as CABI Space in the following section of the chapter.

Nonetheless, I am stressing the idea of questioning public space here, because in what follows I want to show how 'the public' remains an unsettled and unstable concept, perhaps particularly at the present moment. One arena where this is apparent, and one which has direct impacts on the localities of my research, is in UK government policy. In the first part of this chapter I want to show how many recent domestic policy programmes and initiatives are marked by a sense of uncertainty or even loss around the nature of the public, and a desire to re-constitute it in particular ways. The localities of my research are the subject of many government initiatives, as will become clear, and indeed it is impossible to think about 'public space' there as separate from these initiatives. This in itself raises the issue which I touched on earlier, around the relationship of the public to the state.

The sense that it has now become difficult to imagine the public as a coherent entity is also key to more theoretical debates, particularly those springing from Habermas' writing (1991) in which he develops the notion of the public sphere through historical analysis. As I will go on to discuss, recent writing around this topic (for example the edited collections of Robbins 1993a and Calhoun 1992a) has fundamentally questioned some of the assumptions underlying such a model, especially its ability to deal adequately with 'difference' and the particularity of situated political concerns. One especially important source of such a critique has been the work of feminist writers who have argued that 'the public' as it is often conceived excludes much female experience. I will explore some analysis

of women's political activity, both historically and in the present, which has shown how it tends to disrupt traditional boundaries between the public and the private (eg Staeheli 1996). As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, this is relevant to my fieldwork sites where the activities of the community groups were linked to private or domestic lives.

Although I begin my analysis of policy with a brief discussion of urban environments, the bulk of this chapter will be concerned with broader questions of 'the public', which potentially leave an explicitly spatial analysis to one side. Therefore, in the final parts of this chapter I shall look more closely at some recent attempts in academic writing to theorise the public through the lens of urban public space, and begin to draw out some issues around what it might mean to consider the public as spatial. In particular, I am concerned to question some of the ways in which space has been thought about in recent writing within cultural geography, and to explore what current debates around the 'materiality' of everyday spaces might bring to understandings of public space. I conclude the chapter by suggesting a framework for analysing public space that I will be returning to throughout the thesis.

1.2 Policy and the public

1.2.1 Approaching policy

In order to begin to explore ways in which the idea of 'the public' is currently under question, my starting point is therefore current UK government policy. In this section I will discuss modes of 'publicness' which are currently circulating within policy arenas. Of course, there are other forums and discourses where similar issues are under debate, from theoretical writing to the mass media and popular culture, and indeed these debates are structured by the same fundamental questions. However, the particular ways in which these questions play out within policy have immediate impacts for my fieldwork sites. This therefore represents a set of concerns springing directly from the research context, as a way in to thinking more conceptually about the nature of the public. Indeed I will return to issues of government policy and practice at a range of levels throughout the thesis.

Before moving on to focus specifically on issues around the public, I want to begin by noting that in approaching 'policy' as an area of analysis, it is important to recognise that this constitutes a complex arena of discourses, interactions, and relationships. This cannot be studied through a focus on policy documents and speeches alone, which inevitably glosses over the 'paradoxes, balancing acts, irresolvable tensions and contradictions' (Taylor 2003:14) that lie behind them. I hope to give a sense of this complexity throughout the thesis, especially in Chapter Three where I

discuss the broader sphere of local government in Stoke-on-Trent. There I will look at the ways in which central government policies, particular understandings about Stoke as a place, and the experiences of individual officials combine to affect how local government actors conceive of 'the public' that they work with. In my overall analysis, therefore, I am approaching the state as a 'bundle of everyday institutions and forms of rule' (Corbridge et al 2005: 5), of which policy documents and programmes are one aspect.

Nonetheless at this stage, in developing some broad themes around policy, I will be seeking to pull out narratives that are centrally linked to policy discourses and texts of various kinds. Indeed, whatever the messiness and partiality of actual interventions and interactions, government policy is unavoidably discursive, because of its rhetorical intent (see Lees 2003). Stone (quoted in Hastings 1998: 199) argues that policy discourses use narratives to frame certain 'problems' that will then 'lead the audience ineluctably to a course of action'.

However, even considering policy discursively does not make it a coherent object of analysis. In the case of the current UK government, the narratives and 'problems' it frames clearly need to be understood within the particular project of the New Labour administration, which has tried to carve out an ideological position somewhere between both the 'old Labour' social democratic project of previous post-war Labour governments, and the right-wing administration which immediately preceded it (Hall 2003). Therefore issues around 'the public' represent

attempts to reinvigorate 'discourses that had been submerged or marginalised during the Thatcher and Major administrations' (Newman 2001: 6), including those around 'democracy, citizenship, society, community, social inclusion, partnership, public participation' (ibid). Yet such languages do not replicate previous left-wing government stances either. This perhaps creates a particularly complex set of dynamics. Janet Newman (2001) analyses the New Labour project in terms of quite distinct sets of policy goals, which may complement each other at times but at others may be contradictory. Indeed other commentators (eg Imrie and Raco 2003b) have noted an experimental and partial quality to the current government's policy initiatives, in relation to urban regeneration in particular.

1.2.2 'Public spaces' and urban policy

As discussed in the Preface, an explicit policy focus on urban 'public' spaces (understood, as already mentioned, primarily, as physical outdoor environments) has tended to be linked to urban regeneration strategies aiming to transform the fortunes of Britain's post-industrial cities. The need for broad-based change within cities, talked about in terms of a new 'vision' or an 'urban renaissance' was articulated in the Urban Task Force Report (DETR 1999) and the government's response, the Urban White Paper (DETR 2000). These sought to link together better transport, design and planning strategies, with promoting inner-city living and ultimately economic development. As the Urban White Paper puts it:

We want our towns, cities and suburbs to be places for people, places that are designed, built and maintained on the principle that

people come first. They should contribute to the quality of life and encourage healthy and sustainable lifestyles. They should be places in which we want to live, work, bring up our children, and spend our leisure time. They should be places which promote economic success and allow people to share in rising prosperity, attracting and retaining successful businesses (DETR 2000: 41).

Although such sentiments are expressed as relevant to all urban areas, the underlying emphasis on the economic success of cities means that outdoor urban spaces tend to be focused on in terms of economic value:

Urban areas have a poorer local environment than non-urban areas with more litter, graffiti, noise and pollution...this can be an added incentive for people to move out. It can also be important in business decisions about where to locate and, therefore, have an impact on competitiveness and prosperity (ibid: 66).

This means that in practice, as I suggested in the Preface, only certain kinds of spaces have benefited from such policy initiatives, largely in city centres where they are seen as contributing to economic change (Loftman & Nevin 2003). Loretta Lees (2003) argues that processes of class-based 'gentrification' are actually at the heart of this agenda, as in the focus in the above quotes on the mobile middle classes who need to be retained in cities.

More recently, an agenda around urban environments or public spaces has been taken forward in the government's plan for new housing developments or 'sustainable communities' (ODPM 2003), where one of the features of such developments is expressed as, 'a safe and healthy

local environment with well-designed public and green space' (5). The last four years have also seen a number of small-scale government initiatives around 'liveability' (ODPM 2002) and the creation of CAFE Space, a new government agency, as mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter. To an extent these initiatives have moved the discussion away from city centres towards a focus on residential environments or 'communities'. In a speech Stuart Lipton (2003), the chair of CAFE (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), spoke of the need to:

... build and regenerate flourishing, living communities, places where people will choose to live, where they take responsibility, and where civic space mirrors the ambition and aspiration of the local community.

As I will go on to discuss later in this section on policy, the relationship between 'public spaces' and certain understandings of 'community' and 'neighbourhood' is an important one within the New Labour project (see Cooper 1998). These various terms do point to the same nexus of issues, which I want to frame as concerned with the nature of 'the public'. Indeed I want to suggest that, in order to think through more carefully what is going on within these policy initiatives, it is instructive to move away from documents or initiatives where 'public space' itself is an explicit category. Therefore in the rest of this section I am going to take a broader approach to policy, which cuts across areas, including not only those concerned with parks and outdoor spaces, but with crime and policing, the management

and delivery of public services and 'community participation' in a range of contexts.

Although, as will become clear, I do not want to argue that there is a unified or coherent project here, I do want to suggest that it is appropriate to consider policy concerns about the nature of political and civic engagement across such a spectrum of interventions. Indeed the government has itself sought to connect such issues through narratives around 'the public'. David Blunkett (2003), the then Home Secretary, said in a speech

... we need to reinvigorate the public realm, in both the sense of physical public spaces, and the non-state arena of public debate and opinion formation. The United Kingdom has a wealth of public spaces, many of them the legacy of the Victorian era. This was a period in which philanthropy, energetic civic pride and pioneering social improvement programmes combined to create squares, parks, public monuments, museums, libraries and buildings that were beacons of self-worth, and often the focus for democratic interaction as much as social interaction.

The speech then goes on to discuss ways in which the qualities he draws from 19th century urban life might be re-established now.

Throughout the thesis I will therefore be considering the 'public spaces' that might be linked to government policy interventions as including not just physical outdoor spaces as referred to here, but other potential spaces of collective engagement and action, from local newspapers to

forums of policy debate. Although I will return to discussing the spatialities of the public more explicitly in the last part of this chapter, I essentially want to hold open the category of 'public space' as far as possible. In the rest of this section on policy I will discuss three broad modes of 'publicness' which, I suggest, are present across a range of policy areas.

1.2.3 A public of consumers?

If, as Lees (2003) argues the public who might be enticed to return to city centres are valued essentially as economic agents, this perhaps ties in to a broader shift in government thinking in terms of rethinking the public as primarily 'consumers' (Bauman 1998). More specifically, one persistent theme (which in many ways follows on directly from initiatives under the right-wing government) is a recasting of the role of government service users in this way (Clarke 2004, Clarke & Newman 2005). This seems to be a move away from a collectivist orientation often described as the 'one-size-fits-all' model of welfare provision, towards more individualised and differentiated services, bringing attendant 'expectations of choice, responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility' (Clarke 2004: 2). As well as catering to a supposedly more demanding public, such a move is also a means for central government to put pressure on service providers, what Stuart Hall (2003: 16) calls 'the new managerialism'. This involves setting targets and highlighting successes and failures, in ways that in theory empower the public to make informed choices. This process can also therefore be understood as being about developing new kinds of relationship and trust between service providers and the public (Bauman

1998), which in the past might have been more implicitly assumed out of deference to the professional status of those providing services.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting immediately that whilst the policy rhetoric around a consuming public may have a certain coherence, most experiences of using public services feel much more ambivalent. This indeed reflects ambivalences within the New Labour project itself. John Clarke (2004: 11) recounts seeing two signs next to each other on a hospital wall, one announcing that the department was 'patient friendly' and committed to 'working in partnership with patients and the public', with the other stating that the hospital 'will prosecute anyone who abuses or uses violence against the property or staff of the Trust'. Whilst not disputing the need for staff to be protected from abuse, Clarke argues that the juxtaposition of these signs suggests some uncertainty about who 'the public' who will be coming to the hospital is, whether they are sovereign consumers who have chosen to come (and whose needs will be met) or whether they are potentially 'unpredictable and unpleasant' people who will only be given services under certain conditions because of an obligation on the part of the providers to do so.

Indeed, a critical analysis of such a tension might suggest that whether you feel cast into a role as a consumer or a deviant by encounters with public services depends on a broader socio-economic positioning. Clarke (2004) also proposes that it is primarily the middle-classes who are in a position to articulate demands and have the resources to actively exercise a right to choose. Those living in more difficult socio-economic

circumstances (such as those with whom I undertook research) may have a less empowering relationship with local service-providers, who are anyway likely to be operating under more difficult circumstances, in terms of increased or different kinds of pressure on services (see Lupton 2003).

Nonetheless, within New Labour policy discourses this dynamic is likely to be understood on a more individual and less structural basis, as a tension between 'reasonable' or 'desirable' consumers of public services, as opposed to 'unreasonable ones' who might act in an inappropriate way or use up an inordinate amount of resources (for example being abusive to staff, as in the example discussed above). Indeed, further than this, I would suggest that a distinct aspect of New Labour's approach is precisely an authoritarian and moral imperative around shaping behaviour and collective values, which works to assert a certain version of 'the public' (see Cooper 1998). Here then, there is a sense of the public needing to be actively worked on in processes which Nikolas Rose (2001: 6) terms 'autonomization and reponsibilization'. Indeed this forms the second of the broad modes of publicness I want to draw out of current policy.

1.2.4 Shaping public behaviour

Labour MP and ex-Minister Frank Field has written of 'the politics of behaviour' (2003) which he discusses with particular reference to so-called 'anti-social behaviour', often located in deprived areas, around which he calls for tough action from the government,

...tackling the breakdown of a common decencies culture requires an effort equal to that which is mobilised for war, for war this is in

one of the most difficult of terrains.... In the absence of a clear public philosophy which lays down what constitutes decent behaviour, we are witnessing a withdrawal of a considerably larger group of the population who now fail to rally to defend a common decency culture (126-127).

Such concerns have been taken up to a considerable extent within recent government legislation and initiatives, and this is the second approach to publicness within New Labour policy which I wish to discuss. Within the context of 'anti-social behaviour' and other policing initiatives⁴ there is an emphasis on what Newman (2001: 148) calls 're-integrative public shaming', using both legal and communal pressures to change the behaviour of individuals who are not seen to conform to acceptable collective standards. Here, the 'public', and therefore public space, should be made to reflect the values of the 'respectable majority' (Cooper 1998: 471). Similar discourses and measures are applied to other kinds of behaviour, including binge drinking in city centres, littering, graffiti, and other 'incivilities', often visible in outdoor urban spaces (see Kelling and Wilson 1982).

Young people are often seen as a particular 'problem' within such discourses around urban space (Stratford 2002), as I will go on to explore in relation to my fieldwork sites. Tony Blair's (2001) speech around 'improving your local environment' focused on issues including youth offending, the use of CCTV, graffiti, littering and reducing traffic accidents, within an argument that:

⁴ I will be discussing 'anti-social behaviour' in relation to my fieldwork sites in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

We need stronger local communities and an improved quality of life. Streets where parents feel safe to let their children walk to school. Where people want to use the parks. Where graffiti, vandalism, litter and dereliction are not tolerated. Where the environment in which we live fosters rather than alienates a sense of local community and mutual responsibility.

More recently, such issues have been taken up under the heading of the so-called 'Respect' agenda around shaping the values and behaviour of young people in particular, and tackling:

....a disrespect for other people, for their rights, for the community, when communities can only work by rules of civil conduct that everyone is prepared to accept, by give as well as take, and crucially by respect for other people (Blair 2005).

Much of the anxiety around these issues can be seen as an anxiety around the next generation and their failure to participate in a responsible 'public'. In the speech cited above, Blair announced new forms of 'parenting contracts and orders', within the suggestion that families might be both the locus and solution of such problems.

Ideologically such initiatives can be understood as related to a 'communitarian' agenda, associated with the writings of Etzioni (1993), as well as being taken up through discussions around the 'Third Way' (Giddens 1994, 1998). Here government attention and action is focused on family and neighbourhood life, rather than either the atomised

individual or broader structural social issues,⁵ as part of a project of both building trust with government and reshaping collective behaviour on a micro-level. In this, as signalled earlier, the notion of 'the public' is clearly understood as tied in with the idea of 'community', as is evident from the extensive use of the term in the above quotes from Blair's speeches. Robert Putnam, who has developed a highly influential analysis of 'social capital' (2001) and its importance in democratic, social and economic renewal (see Kearns 2003), writes:

...the ebbing of community over the last few decades has been silent and deceptive. We notice its effects... in the degradation of our public life (cited in Raco and Imrie 2003b: 8).

As a number of commentators have suggested, 'community' as an idea associated with the public can be seen as suggesting a set of harmonious and orderly relationships (Lees 2003b). Indeed, a third mode of the reconstitution of the public, which I suggest ties in with these concerns around 'social capital' and the remaking of 'community' within certain understandings of this, is to do with involvement in government decision making. This is often termed 'public participation' or 'community involvement' (Imrie and Raco 2003; Newman 2001; Taylor 2003), and is the final approach to publicness that I will discuss in the following section.

⁵ A further crucial aspect of this agenda is individual ability to enter the labour market. As Barnes and Prior (2000: 95) point out, paid work is seen as 'a key component in determining social inclusion/exclusion'. Such an emphasis was evident in state interventions within the neighbourhoods around training and skills, which I discuss in later chapters.

1.2.5 A participatory public?

On a practical level, recent modes of such public participation variously take the form of representation on decision-making bodies, the convening of public meetings, consultations and forums, and more direct volunteer involvement in particular programmes. Such involvement clearly overlaps with the two modes of publicness already discussed, around both consuming public services and shaping collective behaviour. More specifically, Janet Newman (2001) sees this approach as springing from a desire by central government to exert particular forms of pressure on local providers, as well as a belief in the educative value of such involvement for participants. These goals are expressed in a recent ODPM/ Home Office (2005: 7) document:

...by enabling communities to help shape decisions on policies and services we will support civil renewal and strengthen the legitimacy of the institutions of government. The more effectively communities are engaged in shaping services, the more likely it is that quality will be delivered.

Again it is noteworthy in this document that such engagement is envisaged as springing from involvement at a neighbourhood or 'community' scale.

The proposed shift in the relationship between government and 'the public' here is quite a radical one and over the course of the thesis I intend to explore the issues it raises through my empirical material. At this stage it is worth noting that such policy initiatives have been the subject of extensive critical comment, essentially revolving around the question of

how power might operate within such initiatives, and therefore what forms of publicness are being produced or enabled. Susan Brin Hyatt (1997), drawing on the work of Nikolas Rose, suggests that such processes of participation are essentially a means for the production and control of citizens by government, in a similar vein to the more explicit control of behaviour that I discussed in the previous section. She argues that

..methods for constituting active and participatory citizens, such as those aimed at empowering the poor...link the subjectivity of citizens to their subjugation and link activism to discipline (224).

Other commentators have focused on how forms of collective interaction are envisaged within these programmes, and draw attention to the 'emphasis on consensus and dialogical processes as the basis for creating harmonious and cohesive communities' (Raco and Imrie 2003b: 29). Indeed such a critique ties this discussion in to a broader theoretical debate around how far 'the public' should be understood as inherently conflictual, which I will discuss in the next part of this chapter. The suggestion here is that by seeking to promote 'culturally homogenous social relationships' (ibid: 8) through such policies, conflict and forms of 'difference' are excluded from such a participatory public. Others again, though, have drawn attention to the partiality and unpredictability of public participation processes (North 2003; Wainwright 2003), which for all their limitations do at least offer the potential for people to articulate needs, and gain resources to generate local action. Indeed Allan Cochrane (2003) argues that analysing participation in terms of either 'empowerment' or 'incorporation' may be misleading, in that the state is necessarily involved

in the production of 'community' or 'the public'. Therefore the focus of analysis should be rather on 'the manufacture of different forms of political and civic legitimacy' (230). This raises the broader issue of the relationship between the state and the public. Keane (1998, quoted in Genberg 2002: 257) writes, 'while a more democratic order cannot be built through state power, it cannot be built without state power', suggesting a delicate balance or series of negotiations. These are the issues around public participation which I will seek to explore in relation to the fieldwork material.

1.2.6 The place of policy

As I have begun to indicate, initiatives and pronouncements springing from the kinds of approaches outlined above are very much in evidence in the places where I undertook fieldwork, and I shall therefore return to discuss these issues throughout the thesis. In this concluding section on policy and 'the public', I will briefly outline how such questions will resurface in relation to my empirical material.

In fact it is arguable that the kinds of housing estates where I conducted my fieldwork are places where, for the government, these anxieties around the nature of the public are felt most acutely. Built at a time when there was perhaps a more confident sense of 'the public' enshrined in such provision (Ley 1993), they are now often seen, or at least popularly depicted in the media, as places of the breakdown of collectivity, of 'nuisance neighbours', run-down parks, boarded up shops, and gangs of out-of-control youths (see Hastings and Dean 2000). A whole raft of recent

measures of the kind discussed in this section, aimed in particular at deprived neighbourhoods, have attempted to generate new forms and processes of collective interaction and engagement with local government, as much as improving economic and material conditions (Social Exclusion Unit 1998). The following chapters will demonstrate the effects of such measures on the fieldwork neighbourhoods, and in particular their impact on the work of the two community groups.

Of course, as discussed at the start of this section, understanding the field of state interactions involves more than tracing policy narratives or initiatives. Therefore, at points in the rest of the thesis I will be considering how the modes of publicness discussed here are caught up with other kinds of dynamics and interactions in a range of contexts, and at a range of scales. Specifically, in Chapter Three I consider the public of Stoke-on-Trent as it is imagined and constituted in relation to local government, based primarily on interviews with local government officials. In Chapter Four I discuss the dynamics of the neighbourhoods where my fieldwork took place, essentially from the perspectives of the two community groups. The ways in which the state both imagines and intervenes in these neighbourhoods is a crucial component of this. Chapters Five and Six focus more closely on the spaces produced by the two community groups, which are again intrinsically tied up with the work of local government and other official agencies. In particular in Chapter Six I discuss some of the difficulties for the groups in asserting their projects within particular modes of 'local politics', of which the actions of local government officials are one

aspect. Throughout these discussions there are clearly overlapping issues and concerns.

In summary then, the New Labour project is intimately concerned with forging new kinds of public, which will enter into new relationships with government, although this is being imagined in multiple and shifting ways. At the centre of this is a sense that the government perceives a fundamental shift in the nature of collective interaction and association, which requires new kinds of government. Tony Blair's 2005 Labour Party conference speech spoke of the relentless pace of social change, encompassing globalisation, technology, the changing contexts of family life and the impacts on regimes of government:

Today is not the era of the big state; but a strategic one:
empowering, enabling, putting decision making in the hands of
people not government (Blair 2005b).

However, beneath such rhetoric, how such shifts will play out in practice remains uncertain, as I have emphasised throughout this section. Ken Worpole (2000: 130), who often addresses a government policy audience, writes in relation to the need to revitalise public spaces, that we are now in a situation, 'so different from the early years of this century when the political challenge of a democratic public culture seemed simply a matter of finding the political will and the money – today the very notion of a modernizing politics and culture seems much more complex'.

One way of thinking through this complexity and uncertainty is to focus more clearly on some fundamental theoretical questions around the nature

of 'the public', which indeed I have already begun to touch on in the discussion in this section. Such questions allow us to both critically consider current policy interventions and imagine alternatives. What is the importance of 'the public' within an understanding of politics? Is it possible to imagine one coherent public realm? Should the public be an arena of conflict or consensus? What should the relationship between this public and the state be, and what kind of power relations are at stake? In the next section I am going to address these issues more directly through the writings of some contemporary political theorists.

1.3 Publics, counterpublics and 'difference'

Such issues have been developed within political theory with particular reference to Jurgen Habermas' conception of 'the public sphere' (1991). This was an historically specific account of the development of sites of bourgeois political participation in the 18th century, in which 'rational discussion of public matters' (Fraser 1993: 4) could take place, a realm of discussion, which in its ideal form at least, held the state accountable to society and brought pressures to bear where necessary. Habermas' account was highly significant both in terms of his emphasis on the need for a separation between this public and the state, and in his suggestion that the power of citizens might be exercised through a process of debate rather than by dint of pre-existing power structures. As Craig Calhoun (1992b: 2) explains, 'In this public sphere, practical reason was institutionalised through norms of reasoned discourse, in which arguments, not status or traditions, were to be decisive'.

Clearly this model was intended to be an ideal-type which, as Habermas acknowledged, was never fully realised in practice, even at the historical moment to which he is referring (see Fraser 1993). However recent writing on the subject (for examples essays in Calhoun 1992a and Robbins 1993a), whilst acknowledging the importance of the concept of the public sphere as a part of democratic societies, has been concerned to highlight some fundamental flaws with the model that Habermas proposes.⁶ At root, Habermas' faith in spaces of abstract rational debate, in which differences in identity and therefore status and power can be 'bracketed' (Fraser 1993: 4), has been questioned.

In fact as Geoff Eley argues (1992), through a revisionist analysis of the 18th and early 19th centuries, many groups were excluded from the official male bourgeois sphere and therefore there were always alternative publics made up of groups including 'women, subordinate nationalities, popular classes like the urban poor, the working class and the peasantry' (326). Indeed he sees the bourgeois public sphere as itself 'fractured and contested' (ibid). The relationships between these publics were structured by economic, social and cultural forms of power. Therefore the bourgeois public sphere can be viewed as quite a specific form of public, which needs to be understood within the context of contemporary power relations. Indeed Nancy Fraser describes such a sphere as 'a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule' (Fraser 1993: 8).

⁶ Although see Barnett (2003) for a more sympathetic treatment of Habermas' ideas.

Fraser (1993) develops a concept of overlapping or competing 'counterpublics', which are not just different spaces but are formed through different understandings of the public interest or the common good, for example among members of black and ethnic minority groups. In her analysis the question of what is legitimately 'public' is therefore highly politicised and never settled. Such an idea is discussed more explicitly by Chantal Mouffe (1994). She argues that it is conflict or debate over the very construction of the 'respublica', the rules of civic engagement, which is at the heart of politics, rather than particular substantive issues. These arguments therefore, begin to suggest a critical account of the ways in which the current policy regimes discussed earlier seek to tie down the nature of the public. In fact Mouffe (2000) has written specifically about the 'Third Way' project, which she describes as 'a politics without adversary' in its attempts to circumscribe political subjectivity and collective interaction within narrow terrains. Instead she argues for a conception of politics as 'agonistic pluralism' (11).

Indeed Fraser argues (1993) that the importance of retaining different forms of 'publicness' is not just that power struggles between groups are in themselves constitutive of politics, but also that 'counter-publics' are needed to retain the diversity of identities in pluralistic societies. She suggests that even within an idealised and hypothetical 'egalitarian society' diverse groups need spaces of expression, consciousness-raising and opinion-formation. She argues that publics are 'arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities' (1993: 16) rather than just

spaces of debate from pre-existing subject positions. As Bruce Robbins (1993b: xvii) suggests, drawing on Negt and Kluge, 'to speak of a working-class public sphere.... rather than working-class culture, is to stress a site of interaction and continuing self-formation rather than a given or self-sufficient body of ideas and practices distinguishing one group from others'. This also suggests a less 'bounded' and self-contained view of what a 'public' is, that we might think of in a more dispersed and plural way than a Habermasian model suggests. Indeed recent writing (eg Warner 2004) has tended to write of 'publicness' as a quality, or a 'multitudinous presence' (Robbins 1993: xii), rather than bounded public spheres.

This more plural, constitutive and emergent sense of 'publicness' perhaps also opens up new ways of thinking about how connections and negotiations across 'difference' might take place. This is clearly a crucial issue to consider if we accept the need for different kinds of publics for different groups. As Leonie Sandercock (1998: 186) writes

A politics of difference, in the end, must be able to take on board some (redefined) notion of the good of/in that society. This does not necessarily mean the return of the outmoded concept of 'the public interest' but it does demand the creation of a civic culture from the interaction of multiple publics.

This turns our attention to what is meant by interaction. Although Habermas' ideal of rational-critical debate, involving the exchange of reasons from given positions, may appear too narrow a concept of political

communication, a view of competing groups held in relations of contest may simply leave us with a sense of infinite fragmentation.

Instead there may be a need to explore other forms of communication and interaction. To return to considering policy initiatives, if programmes of 'public participation' are seen to have some potential for more democratic forms of government, they may need to work to include other modes of subjectivity or being political. In Janet Newman's (2001) discussion of New Labour's programme around 'public participation', she argues that '...the norms of rationality and the impersonal mode of discourse that are privileged in participative fora, may marginalize cultural styles based on personal, affective or value-based modes of expression ' (132). She goes on to suggest that 'the task of democratic innovation and public participation (is)... one based in part on the recognition of counterpublics and the validation of informal political processes' (136). Iris Marion Young (1990a: 100) has written specifically about the importance of the 'bodily and affective' in 'reaching understanding' across difference. For example, she argues (2000) for the recognition of aspects of communication such as greetings, handshakes, hugs, the offering of food and drink and making 'small talk', all of which may appear peripheral to structures of political debate and interaction.

I will be drawing attention to such aspects of interaction in the rest of the thesis, which is essentially an exploration of the significance of spaces and times that may seem to be far-removed from visible and official politics. My argument therefore links in with the suggestions of Fraser and Young

in terms of conceptualising publicness and political interaction differently. Throughout the thesis I will be considering questions of 'difference' from various perspectives, and exploring potentials for interactions between those who may be understood as belonging to different groups.

Nonetheless, the ways in which forms of social 'difference' are constructed and played out clearly varies, as will become clear from the empirical material, and there is therefore a need to carefully consider the particularity of these constructions.

One particular axis of difference, which has been seen as strongly linked to the nature of the public sphere as traditionally conceived, is that of gender. Thinking about the public in terms of more bodily and emotional encounters takes us into what has been understood as the realm of 'private experience'. Indeed, the ways in which female experience and collective action have a particular relationship with dominant understandings of the public and the private has been the subject of extensive comment, and it is to this which I will turn in the following section.

1.4 The public and the private

The extent to which Habermas' analysis of the public sphere is blind to issues of gender has been an important point of criticism for much subsequent analysis, as in Fraser's (1993) suggestion, as already noted, that the realm which he describes is essentially 'masculinist'. The notion of a sphere of impartial discourse distinct from domestic and bodily aspects of experience clearly works to relegate women, who have traditionally been seen as 'caretakers of affectivity, desire and the body', (Young: 1990a: 101) from arenas of politics and decision-making. Indeed Seyla Benhabib (1993) argues that the way in which the line between public and private has been understood has 'been part of a discourse of domination that legitimises women's oppression and exploitation in the public realm' (93).

Many writers have dealt with such exclusion historically, although even at periods when women were excluded from public life in very structural and institutionalised ways, commentators have worked to show how they nonetheless found creative ways and spaces to assert influence and develop solidarity (Davidoff and Hall 1987; Domosh 1998; Hansen 1983, cited in Robbins 1992 xviii). For example, Mary Ryan (1992) describes how in early nineteenth century America, women played a significant role in providing for the poor, producing an early version of a welfare system. As she writes, 'It was women – excluded, silenced or shouted down in the public, democratic and male dominated spaces – who carved out another space in which to invest psychic, social, and political energies' (273).

Within a contemporary context, despite the formal inclusion of women in many aspects of public life, and important progress within modern democracies in bringing issues affecting women into arenas of discussion, politics is arguably still conceived of in ways which exclude female experiences. Lowndes (2000) points out that commentators on 'social capital', a key concept within contemporary policy discourse and policy formation, have focused almost entirely on male-dominated activities such as sports clubs and pub attendance. She notes that this 'disregards an entire sphere of relevant activity – that is the social networks that involve parents (almost universally mothers) in their roles as child-carers' (534). Lowndes proposes that this suggests the endurance of the public/private division within politics whereby 'the cluster of activities, values, ways of thinking and ways of doing things which have long been associated with women are all conceived of as outside the political world of citizenship and largely irrelevant to it' (James 1992, quoted in Lowndes 2000: 535).⁷

Indeed, the question of whether it is appropriate to conceive of a distinctive style of politics or political organising among women, and the impact this has on concepts of the public and the private, has been discussed in a number of ways. Stall and Stoecker (1998) suggest quite a clear-cut distinction between what they called 'women centred organising'

⁷ Although arguably programmes like Sure Start, which I will discuss later in the thesis, precisely work to link family life and childcare to citizenship, although perhaps not in the ways that a feminist analysis would support. Indeed, there is now a strong emphasis on 'life politics' (Giddens 1994) and the private realm in current policy discourses, and this perhaps requires such academic commentaries to consider carefully how they are positioning themselves in relation to such discourses. This is certainly an issue that I have been aware of in developing the arguments of this thesis (see the Conclusion).

and a community activism tradition influenced by Saul Alinsky. They see the Alinsky tradition as characterised by 'aggressive public sphere confrontation' (735) such as demonstrations, mass meetings and highly visible, symbolic forms of protest which seek to shift the balance of power within a particular context. The women-centred model they see as grounded in 'the more relational world of private sphere personal and community development' (735), in other words, beginning with personal transformation, care and 'empowerment' and expanding this in ways that ultimately dissolve boundaries between private and public realms. Stall and Stoecker also link such activism to 'an ethic of care' as a framework for politics, as opposed to an 'ethic of justice', (see also Gilligan 1982, Day 2000) in which caring and nurturing relationships are extended beyond the home.

Although these propositions are very important in giving recognition and value to activities which may not seem significant, such analytical frameworks do perhaps risk tying down or essentialising women's activism, and indeed female identities more broadly, into certain modes of politics. More 'confrontational' modes of collective action continue to be widely recognised as political and, as such, enable groups to gain visibility and ultimately extract concessions from those in positions of power. Indeed other commentators (Fincher and Panelli 2001; Staeheli 1996) argue that women activists are more mobile and self-reflexive than Stoecker and Stall's proposals might suggest. Fincher & Panelli propose that women 'make strategic use of spaces, places and various spatial scales' (129) in that they are able to move between spheres and modes

conventionally understood as private or public to their advantage. Staeheli (1996) argues that women's collective action breaks down boundaries between public and private, but the fact that it is often 'placed' in the private sphere operates to their advantage in giving them 'shelter' to develop strategies which may not be visible. Indeed Ryan's (1992) analysis of 19th century women's activities follows a similar argument: 'beyond this flimsy scrim of privacy, women met a public need, saved public funds, and behaved as shrewd politicians' (279).

For my own purposes, I want to use such debates around the public and the private to explore the particular nature of the spaces of the groups. Using my fieldwork material I will go on to draw attention to the importance of the groups' activities and explore the 'small democracies' (Lowndes 2000: 537) of childcare activities, parties and get-togethers which may continue to be seen as trivial and non-political. In this I see a kind of fluidity between public and private (or domestic) lives and realms of activity, as I shall discuss. However, I wouldn't necessarily see this as inevitably a gendered mode of politics, given that men were involved in the groups in various ways, and indeed such involvement was actively sought out by the women.

Despite such a sense of fluidity, these categories of public and private did retain importance at times, both in considering how the group members understood their work, and in how it was seen by others. Also, at certain moments, gender did come into play as an important aspect of the construction of the groups' spaces. In particular, they faced obstacles to

entering what might be thought of as more visible, conventionally public spaces of political participation, because of the nature of their activities but also because of their gender and class positions. I shall demonstrate how this plays out for the groups in Chapter Six in particular.

Therefore when considering the questions of strategy and agency which I have drawn attention to within feminist commentaries, it is not enough to simply validate or recognise other forms of collective action or politics: we also need to think critically and more structurally about the nature of 'public' or official politics. This returns me to Janet Newman's (2001) comments about the forms of public participation that are recognised, and the need to think beyond formal modes. Clearly, the kinds of domestic and family-orientated activities I have referred to are strongly shaped by the dynamics of sociability and informality that she draws attention to.

To come back to my points at the end of the previous section about the need for communication and interaction across 'difference', it may be that it is precisely in the informality, sociability and fluidity of everyday interactions, rather than formal politics, that connections between groups or publics become possible. This is why it is important to look beyond conventional notions of public and private. In a similar vein, Paul Gilroy (2004: xi) writes about the possibility of 'convivial culture' as an objective for increasingly diverse societies, rather than a conception of distinct ethnic or racial groups:

The radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification.

However, it is perhaps difficult to think through what such processes might involve without focusing on particular times and spaces. Having moved away from my initial discussion of urban environments to bring into view broader policy-related and theoretical issues around 'the public', in the next section I want to return to consider the spatial implications and dimensions of the debates discussed. In the following section of this chapter I am going to focus on academic writing which takes a specifically spatial approach to the issue of the public, and proposes different ways of conceptualising the relationship between the processes and spheres of activity which might be thought of as making up 'the public', and urban spaces in particular.

1.5 Spaces of the public

Thinking 'spatially' about the nature of the public is not just a question of applying theoretical positions to spaces, but rather is an approach that in itself shapes those theoretical positions (Massey 2005). Nonetheless recent writing about urban public space is obviously bound up with many of the same questions I have considered in the preceding sections of this chapter. One important direction has been to consider the ways in which both government and corporate power have attempted to shape and control certain versions of urban public spaces, and therefore the public,

as already touched on (eg Lees 2003b; Cooper 1998). In particular, there is a focus in the literature on authoritarian measures to control behaviour and to exclude certain people or groups from public space entirely, as I shall now go on to discuss.

Such measures clearly do tie in to UK government initiatives around 'anti-social behaviour' and so on, although I hope that my discussion of policy also demonstrated that the ways in which 'the public' is being thought about within current UK policy regimes are complex and multi-faceted. Indeed, it is worth noting that much of the writing I will go on to discuss here is concerned with American urban spaces. For example, Don Mitchell's recent book *The Right to the City* (2004) focuses critically on the effect of legal measures and official approaches in American cities to regulate public spaces, through policing strategies, policies targeting the homeless, programmes of redevelopment and 'zoning', all of which work to bring 'order, surveillance, and control over the behaviour of the public' (138). His argument is that totally controlled spaces are actually the antithesis of 'public spaces'. Instead, in an argument clearly linked to the theoretical proposals discussed around counterpublics and 'difference', Mitchell sees public space as essentially a realm of struggle and protest by different groups asserting rights and making demands. The 'public' is therefore made through processes of conflict and struggle which are never settled.

Similarly, Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) argues that rather than seeking to reconcile or subsume difference, conflict over and within urban public

spaces is constitutive of democracy: 'Conflict, division and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence' (289). Deutsche discusses this in relation to redevelopment schemes in New York, where again she sees powerful interests seeking to 'tie down' the nature of the public, and here specifically the purpose and function of 'public space'. For example, she draws attention to attempts to exclude homeless people from parks through arguments that their behaviour was not appropriate for 'public' spaces, which are constructed in such discourses as sites of 'harmony' (277). Such a line of analysis is influenced by Mouffe's (1994) propositions about the conflictual nature of the public and especially the politicised question of how the public is understood and delimited. Within both Mitchell's and Deutsche's accounts, urban public spaces are the symbolic and visible arenas in which such struggles over democracy take place (see also Staeheli and Thompson 1997).

Sharon Zukin's writing (1991, 1995) also considers the ways in which power relations between different groups or interests in the city are visible in public spaces. She focuses more closely on the built environment which she sees as being bound up with particular 'visions' or collective understandings of cities, in her case New York in particular. As she sees it, 'public spaces are the primary site of public culture... (they)... are an important means of framing a vision of social life in the city' (1995: 259). Centrally Zukin develops a critique of redevelopment projects which seek to both 'upgrade' the city for practices of consumption and to police and

control certain groups through design strategies, in a process that she terms 'the aestheticization of fear' (1995: 26).

Nonetheless Zukin also asserts that it is possible for less powerful interest groups to re-frame or re-vision spaces, 'The right to be in these spaces (streets, shops and parks), to use them in certain ways, to invest them with a sense of ourselves and our communities – to claim them as ours and be claimed in turn by them – make up a constantly changing public culture....public space is inherently democratic. The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended' (1995: 11). For example, she discusses carnivals, festivals and the claiming of certain spaces as heritage sites for particular ethnic groups.

Both Mitchell and Zukin acknowledge the influence of Lefebvre's (1991) analysis of the representational and symbolic qualities of space which make it both constitutive of, and a medium for political struggles, and indeed Kilian (1998) suggests the centrality of his work in stimulating this approach to public space. Such an understanding provides an important framework for critique of dominant and capitalist understandings of space, as in Zukin's framework of the 'symbolic economy' of Manhattan, as well as focusing attention on possibilities for 'resistance' and contestation within visible urban spaces through alternative representations. As Don Mitchell (1995) writes in relation to the occupation of a park in Berkeley, 'Activists see places such as the Park as spaces *for* representation. By *taking* public space, social activists represent themselves to larger

audiences' (125). This process is in itself seen as constitutive of the public sphere.

Although I would not fundamentally disagree with such analysis, I would suggest that this approach risks tying down what constitutes public space, and therefore, indeed the public or publicness, in quite a narrow way.

Much of this writing focuses on what Peter Goheen (1998: 494) calls 'the most highly symbolic urban public places', spaces which are situated in the centre of large cities, (New York in particular). Such spaces are highly symbolically charged, and perhaps already overtly politicised.

Furthermore, by analysing public space in terms of moments of overt and visible struggle over spaces, (moments which are undoubtedly important in thinking about urban politics and democracy) the many interactions and uses which make up people's more day-to-day experiences of urban spaces are potentially excluded.

Indeed Paddison and Sharp (2003: 8) suggest that current debates over public space therefore have a 'totalising' quality. Gary Bridge (2005: 85) also draws attention to such a tendency in recent analysis when he argues that spaces are often framed as 'deliberately meaningful', and the public is somehow understood as consisting of 'set-piece interactions'. He calls for a more expanded and diffuse view of urban politics. This returns me to thinking about spaces of everyday sociability and interaction which may not be understood as 'political', either by official and state-led perspectives, or indeed by critical academic accounts.

Nonetheless, the kind of writing I have discussed above does not represent the entirety of academic writing on urban public space. Alongside such approaches there is a tradition of ethnographic and sociological accounts of public spaces which do indeed focus more on everyday spaces and interactions, perhaps from a less radical or critical position (eg Low 1999, Carr et al 1993, Laurier et al 2001). One writer in particular who might be placed in such a tradition is Richard Sennett.

Admittedly Sennett's considerable body of writing (1970, 1986, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2000, 2003) does not consist of detailed accounts of particular spaces, but rather develops a wide-reaching analysis of public space in cities through historical and theoretical argument. However, unlike the work of Mitchell and Zukin, his focus is less on structural conflict between groups and more on the myriad everyday interactions and negotiations between individual city-dwellers and their ethical and political dimensions. In the tradition of writers like Simmel and Goffman, he essentially writes a kind of urban social psychology through which he develops an argument about the importance of individual exposure to difference through the spaces of cities. Sennett suggests that acting in public is psychologically challenging, an uncomfortable experience of 'survival, struggle and obligation' (1986: 263), but necessary for personal and wider social development. His argument is that we must reject the tendency and desire to interact only within enclaves of those similar to ourselves.

Sennett's ideas represent an important argument against segregation and for the importance and value of everyday urban public space. However, his writing perhaps leaves aside some of the more difficult issues already discussed in this chapter, about the nature and outcome of interaction or communication within public space, and how this might fit into wider understandings of the political. Ted Kilian (1998) suggests that Sennett is primarily interested in the benefits of 'contact' with others in the city, understood in a rather narrow sense, and he points out that such an approach can be criticised for 'its tendency to focus on a public life that is limited and constrained by a bourgeois sensibility' (119). Certainly Sennett does not engage substantially with debates around different forms of publicness, the power relations between them, and the need to recognise and somehow negotiate through this. However, perhaps one strategy for thinking about 'ordinary' urban spaces in this way is to focus again more closely on how the importance of the spatial is being understood.

As I have already argued, understanding spaces solely in terms of their symbolic and representational qualities seems to exclude many more 'ordinary' and non-spectacular spaces. Such an understanding of space is also clearly linked to an understanding of the public as composed of different groups, between which there will always be contest and conflict. Indeed Kilian (1998) argues that Mitchell's work, discussed earlier, espouses an 'anarchical public space' (121), 'the site of endless Hobbesian struggle in which restless fighting is the only outcome' (123). However, as I have suggested, considering the more fine-grained and

everyday qualities of spaces and experiences may also point to new ways of thinking about interaction across difference, in which space is not solely a symbolic medium for the representation of conflicting interests. In the next section of this chapter I will briefly discuss some recent writing which has approached spatiality in different terms, as more multi-sensual, actively practised and emergent.

1.6 'Material' and emergent spaces?

My line of thinking on the values and qualities of space is strongly linked to my use of ethnography as a method, which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter. However this is not simply a methodological issue. The perspectives and materials generated by my methods have had a strong impact on my theoretical framework, which evolved through the fieldwork process rather than being set in place in advance. In particular, as I go on to explore, I want to suggest that ethnography situates the researcher somewhat differently in relation to space compared to a more 'textual' approach where the researcher uncovers symbolic and representational meaning. For me, doing an ethnography of 'ordinary' and non-spectacular spaces has led me to understand the ways in which spaces may have potential to generate forms of politics through their material and experiential aspects, as well as through representational and discursive dimensions. Therefore this aspect of my understanding of public space came about through my fieldwork engagement rather than theoretical reading.

Nonetheless, the kind of understanding of space I am suggesting here does tie in with current discussions within cultural geography (see Nash 2000, Lees 2003a, Latham 2004). Specifically, attempts have been made (see Thrift 1996, 2004) to establish a theoretical lineage and conceptual framework for what might be called 'non-representational theory', or perhaps less contentiously, 'theories of practice' or 'geographies of materiality and affect' (Latham 2004). Broadly, this describes a way of conceptualising the world that differentiates itself from approaches in which understanding is arrived at through a kind of 'reading' or discursive uncovering of the meaning of spaces and events. Rather there is an emphasis on the active and continually emergent nature of experience, which needs to be explored through a more fine-grained attention to the unfolding of particular moments. Hayden Lorimer (2005: 84) talks of this approach as centring around 'multifarious, open encounters in the realm of practice'.

At root, this approach presents itself as a different form of cognition, which goes beyond dualisms between mind and body, theory and practice, reason and emotions, the intellectual and material, and perhaps between culture and nature. Thrift (2004: 85) asks us to pay attention to 'the restless nature of the body's contact with the world...intertwined and continually coming to sense'. Focusing on the whole body's presence in space, rather than just an intellectual analytical engagement, draws attention to multi-sensual, dynamic and affective aspects of experience. It also draws attention to the collective nature of experience, in other words to co-presence and interactions, with other people as well as with the non-

human world and material world. As Susan Smith (2001: 31) points out, this 'concern about the limits of representability' clearly has important methodological implications, as I will go on to discuss in the following chapter.

These theoretical moves, which present themselves as far-reaching and a radical change from previous approaches have, unsurprisingly, been the subject of much questioning and criticism in recent discussions. Most fundamentally, it has been suggested that such an emphasis may take academic analysis away from issues of social justice or 'politics' (see Mitchell 2003; Nash 2000) by being too descriptive perhaps, or too poetic and affirmative. Don Mitchell (2003: 789), discussing recent directions in 'landscape' research more broadly, writes that 'we are enamoured of the affirmative, with seeking out even the smallest glimmers of hope in a world that for the majority really is degenerate', and he argues that landscape analysis needs to be rooted in seeking to understand economic and socio-historic power relations. More specifically, Mike Crang (2003) suggests that there is a danger that bodily presence, and co-presence and the sharing of experience are somehow intrinsically understood as 'good' or 'true' in an uncritical way.

For me, such propositions around space only make sense in relation to specific places and times, and then only if they help us to think about the potentials of those spaces in a new way. In relation to the everyday spaces of the two community groups I studied, I did find that paying attention to small moments of feeling, material contact and connection

helped me to understand their importance, as I hope will become clear. Significantly, I became interested in the provisional and uncertain qualities of space which come into focus through such analysis. Whilst analysis of spaces in terms of their representational and symbolic qualities suggests the ability of particular groups to determine the meaning of spaces, an attention to other kinds of qualities perhaps makes such a process seem more precarious. As I shall go on to explore, the many practices which went into making the very 'everyday' spaces of the two community groups showed the spaces to be fragile and complex achievements. However, paying attention to these qualities of uncertainty or emergence perhaps also suggests ways in which people might be drawn into new relationships and connections beyond the assertion of a particular identity or set of values. This links to Gilroy's (2004) points about 'conviviality' and the possibilities of moving out of fixed identity positions.

Alongside and linked to this idea of uncertainty or emergence, I also became interested in the experiential and 'material' aspects of the spaces I researched. I understand these aspects not in terms of the formal physical qualities of spaces (although these might be important) but in terms of the active and sensory engagements with spaces which give them 'meaning' in an immediate and embodied way, as discussed. This is clearly linked to bodily experiences and also the 'non-human' realm of both objects and other living beings and organisms. Such qualities also tie in to propositions by theorists such as Young (1990a; 2000) around rethinking the public realm and public space in terms of less discursive and more intimate, or bodily forms of interaction.

More broadly, therefore, I am interested in using this approach to give me different ways to understand public spaces and particularly how power and also 'resistance' might operate within this particular context. To return briefly to Don Mitchell's discussion of People's Park in Berkeley, whilst this clearly was 'a symbolic stronghold in the on-going struggles between university planners and city residents' (1995: 109), it also fulfilled a more material role as a place where homeless people actually lived. A focus on this, in many ways obvious point, may shift our understanding of the issues at stake. Indeed discussions of homelessness in relation to public space sometimes 'read' their presence as somehow primarily symbolic or representational (eg Deutsche 1996), rather than considering the complexities and materialities of the lives of the homeless as a perhaps more uncertain and ambivalent form of politics. As John Gulick (1998) points out, many homeless people may actually want secure accommodation and to have their presence understood in such a way, rather than as an expression of a broad philosophical statement about the nature of public space.

Therefore I would agree with Gary Bridge (2005: 85) who writes that he is interested in a concept of the public 'that blurs the boundaries between cognition and emotion, body and world, sympathy and empathy. It leaves us with an idea of the public as fluid, emergent, and as much about the formation of self as the constitution of a wider public'. Nonetheless, considering public space in this expanded way should not mean abandoning all focus on discourse and language, or indeed on the

representational and symbolic qualities of space more broadly. Many of the situations and spaces that I will go on to discuss are still highly discursively structured and framed by enduring power relations. Indeed as in the discussion in the previous section around understanding women's political organising, it is important to recognise actually existing forms of collective action as well as exploring new or previously invisible ones.

Therefore I am interested in thinking about spaces in terms of discursive, symbolic and representational qualities, as well as more experiential, sensual and affective ones. Indeed over the course of the thesis I will explore different kinds of spaces, some of which are highly discursively structured, such as the spaces of public participation with local authority decision-making, although that is not to say that other qualities of space are not present within them too. However, in relation to the spaces developed by the two community groups, I felt that paying attention to more experiential and symbolic qualities helped me to understand what made them successful, or what gave them certain kinds of potential.

A different view of space itself therefore encourages us to think about public space, and in turn democracy and politics, in an expanded way, perhaps as 'relational and dialogic rather than representational and institutional' (Bridge and Watson 2000: 377). Importantly, as I have already noted over the course of this section, this suggests that 'public space' might be explored through considering more everyday or perhaps less obviously 'political' and visible sites compared to riots and demonstrations or the highly contested central spaces of Manhattan. As

Bridge and Watson (ibid: 377) write, public space may instead also exist within the 'possibilities in the interstices of everyday life'.

1.7 Conclusions: a framework for public space

The notion of 'public space' therefore remains a difficult one, which can both point empirically to certain kinds of spaces and suggest an always unattainable ideal. Indeed its status as a concept is somewhat different in different pieces of writing and forms of analysis. For me, it provides a framework for thinking about spaces as enabling certain forms of interaction and collective action. By framing the spaces of my fieldwork as, potentially, public spaces, I am able to link them to broad theoretical issues around democracy and the nature of collective politics. Indeed, unlike much recent analysis of urban spaces, which focuses critically on spaces of government and economic power, my research took place in a context of material deprivation, and tried to get at public space 'from the inside out' (Genberg 2002), through the perspectives of relatively powerless groups who are concerned with the need for collective action. Therefore I was interested in the positive constitution of particular forms of publicness rather than a critique of either theoretical or actually existing forms.

In terms of what this framework might consist of, Gary Bridge (2005: 93) suggests a number of themes for thinking through the public realm in ways which move beyond both ideals of rational discourse and 'the endless play

of difference' suggested by what he calls 'post-structuralist' accounts.⁸

These include a focus on 'practical reason' in situated contexts; on emotions, unconscious and the body; on the interplay between conflict and consensus; on the impossibility of a public that ignores 'self-interest', and the relationship of humans to the material world. All these themes resonate with the issues discussed in this chapter, which I will take forward and develop in relation to my empirical material. I want to set out my own four key themes here, which I will return to in various ways in the rest of the thesis.

Specifically, I am interested firstly in the kinds of spaces which constitute public space, and the different kinds of processes which go into the making of those spaces. When I began my research I had assumed that I would focus on the most visible outdoor spaces in the neighbourhoods, as I shall discuss in Chapter Two. However my own engagement with the groups, and consideration of other theoretical approaches to space, took me away from a focus on particular kinds of space, and drew attention instead to a more active sense of the making of spaces which could be considered public. As I have signalled here, I am particularly interested in the multi-sensual and embodied nature of such practices, which I have discussed in terms of 'material' and 'emergent' qualities of space. As will become clear, the two community groups' work is founded on very practical projects and events, from gardening and cooking together to

⁸ Such a definition would arguably include writings on public space by Fraser, Young, Mouffe, Mitchell and Deutsche, although I hope I have also provided a sense of the particular arguments they make.

shared meals and parties, and I found this approach particularly productive in analysing their significance.

Therefore the public spaces of the groups include spaces which might normally be understood as domestic or intimate, and certainly non-spectacular. Indeed the versions of public space I am interested in exploring disrupt the boundary between public and private lives as this is conventionally conceived. This forms my second set of issues. As I have begun to suggest, the groups tended to operate across such boundaries. I want to consider the ways in which this fluidity might be productive for the groups. However, I also want to explore what this might mean when the groups attempted to enter more official or formal spaces of politics.

As I have already suggested, I found a focus on the fine-grained and multi-sensual aspects of space helped me to think through how forms of connection between different individuals and groups might take place within the spaces of the community groups. Indeed more broadly I also want to consider the ways in which these spaces deal with difference and otherness, and interact with other forms of 'publicness'. This forms my third set of issues. Whilst taking on board the need to recognise 'division and conflict' (Deutsche 1996) as an inherent part of public space, the fear and exclusions potentially generated by such divisions in my empirical context meant that I feel it is also important to emphasise moments of connection, however fragile and temporary. Within the spaces of my fieldwork, this issue was particularly pressing in relation to different age

groups. However, I shall also touch on moments of both connection and disconnection across other forms of 'difference'.

Indeed one of the other ways in which the groups had to negotiate 'difference' was in the relationship between the spaces of the community groups and the activities of the local state. This forms my fourth set of issues. Policy interventions and state actors work to constitute certain forms of publicness, which are intertwined and interlinked with the groups. Exploring such linkages raises questions about the forms of publicness associated with state projects, but also the extent to which they can ever be successful in actually producing them. The issues which emerge from the fieldwork material therefore have implications both for broader debates around democracy and civil society and more policy-orientated discussions about 'public participation' and 'community involvement'.

These four key issues then, around the spatialities of the public, the relationship between public and private, the recognition and negotiation of 'difference', and finally the relationship between the public and the state, should begin to suggest a framework for thinking about public space within the localities of my fieldwork. As should be clear, I have developed this framework as a way of responding to and analysing the spaces of the two groups. However I will also be using these themes to consider other forms of public space that circulate around and impact on the spaces of the groups. These include spaces of engagement between government officials and local people, and the neighbourhood spaces of the localities in which the groups are based. Exploring connections with these other

spaces should allow me to both show how the groups' work was shaped by other contexts, and also show the particular value of the spaces they produced.

Chapter Two

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

At the end of my formal fieldwork period with the group in Westfields I held a discussion session with some of the group members during which we talked about my presence with them over the past ten months. Jill, the chair of the group said 'You must be the only person that's ever done this kind of research in Stoke, actually spent time with people and got down to the grassroots level.' They then talked about other experiences of 'research' or 'interviews', where people had come along, asked lots of questions and then 'disappeared'. As Karen, the group's treasurer commented, 'The next day you think, what was the point of that?'

I felt really gratified when I heard these comments, which suggested that my methodological approach did make some kind of sense to the group. This was in the context of many months of feeling unsure about what I was doing there, and many awkward moments when I felt that perhaps my presence was not welcome. Lawrence Hammar (cited in Kirsch 2004: 4) describes his dilemmas and feelings of awkwardness whilst doing ethnographic fieldwork around HIV/AIDS and sex work in Papua New Guinea, where 'the choice whether to drink, fight, sit down, chew [betel nut], relax, distribute condoms, observe, participate, etc, always seemed

to be wrong'. The context of my research was quite dramatically different and, whilst I was using ethnography, I saw my project as having little in common with more traditional 'anthropological' research involving extended periods among isolated tribal groups. Nonetheless what my research does share with such projects are the tensions around moving between different settings and subjectivities, of leaving behind the more straightforward position of a 'researcher' doing interviews within a limited time frame to something more extended and uncertain.

Indeed my relationship with the Westfields group was never settled, even during the session I mention above. At one point in this discussion about my research Karen also said, 'if somebody really wanted to find out about how this group work they would have to spend a lot of time with each of the committee members'. I took this to be a comment on the fact that I had spent a disproportionate amount of time with Jill, the chair. More fundamentally, although I am still sporadically in touch with the group, they may well now be asking themselves in retrospect 'what was the point of that?'

However, such questions and tensions around different subject positions and forms of knowledge are arguably fundamental to ethnography as a practice. Over time I came to see them as, at least potentially, a source of creative insight rather than necessarily agonising self-doubt. For example, with reference to the discussion above, I feel that it is right that my research approach and the potential benefits to participants remain in question; there is never one correct way to do ethnography and there is

never a straightforward answer to what participants gain from the experience. In this chapter I am going to reflect on how the many tensions and negotiations involved in undertaking my research project, both practical and more abstract, generated the material on which this thesis is based. As Norman Denzin (quoted in Silverman 2001: 47) writes, methods 'define how the topic will be symbolically constituted and how the researcher will adopt a particular definition of self', although I would add that such processes of constitution and definition are not settled once a particular methodological approach has been adopted.

This chapter is going to follow a broadly chronological route through the research process. I will begin with a discussion of the implications of choosing an ethnographic approach to my topic, both in terms of what it can contribute to an understanding of public space, and some of the problematic ethical and epistemological issues it raises. I will then move on to discuss finding a location for fieldwork and negotiating access, followed by reflections on the fieldwork itself. Here I want to focus in particular on how shifting inter-subjective negotiations, 'the warmth and friction' (Cloke et al 2002: 170) of ethnographic fieldwork produced knowledge about the groups. I will finish by discussing the process of analysis and 'writing-up' of my material.

2.2 Choosing ethnography

2.2.1 Public space and ethnography

Chapter One set out some of the issues and questions around public space which, in the rest of the thesis, I will explore in relation to the two community groups with whom I undertook fieldwork. These are situated issues which I developed in relation to the localities of my research and which I focused on progressively during my fieldwork period, linked to the methods used. Although I did set out with broad questions, the research therefore did not proceed through a straightforward linear process of defining research questions, choosing a location and choosing methods, rather all three of these issues developed and emerged in a parallel way. In particular, the choice of ethnography as a methodology did not in itself determine what I would actually do once 'in the field', rather it opened up many questions and further decisions to be taken.

Therefore ethnography is perhaps better understood as an approach than a clearly defined set of methods. Nonetheless early on in the process of focusing my research I was clear that I did want to take such an approach to public space, which I understood and still understand in quite particular ways. This is more than just a practical methodological issue. As Sherry Ortner (1995, quoted in Marshall 2002: 174), writes, 'the ethnographic stance is as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality, a constructive and interpretive mode, as it is a bodily process in space and time'. In this

section I will discuss the relationship between this mode and the topic of public space.

Centrally, the decision to adopt this approach was linked to my concern that much writing on public space does not focus closely enough on the multi-sensual and embodied nature of 'lived experience', an issue which I touched on in the previous chapter, where I discussed different analytical approaches to space. As Laurier et al (2001) note, within writing on public space, theories of the public sphere are sometimes privileged over developing an understanding of specific spaces, as 'finely grained and lived accomplishments' (ibid: 223) from which theories of the public sphere might be extrapolated. Where recent writing on public space within cultural geography has examined particular localities, the position of the researcher or writer has still tended to be somewhat distant from the multiple everyday interactions which make up spaces.⁹ This clearly links in to my discussion in the previous chapter around an essentially 'symbolic' or representational approach to space, within which space can be understood through a kind of critical or politicised 'reading'. As I noted, the empirical focus of such an approach tends to be on spaces which are somehow already politicised or visible, like the contested spaces of central Manhattan (see Zukin 1991, 1995). In terms of methodological implications this approach potentially involves a privileging of the visual or visible as a means to understand spaces, rather than engaging with the experiences of those within them. For example, Teresa Caldeira (1999) discusses the ways in which gated communities in Sao Paulo have

⁹ Although see Domosh 1998 for an historical example which precisely seeks to explore the embodied 'micropolitics' of small-scale gestures and interactions.

changed the meaning of the public realm, through an analysis of both the physical structures of the developments and promotional literature produced about them. Loretta Lees (2003) draws attention to this kind of 'textual' approach to urban analysis, where 'the voices of the public.... are disturbingly silent' (2003: 110).

As discussed, such writing has helped me to think through some of the political issues around public space. However, for my own research, into quite different kinds of space from those discussed above, I have tried to think about public space not just as symbolically constructed but also as more 'active' and multi-sensual, which I talked about in the previous chapter in terms of qualities such as 'materiality' and 'emergence'. This means, as Crouch and Malmo (2003) suggest, thinking about places as formed over time, through different kinds of sensual engagement, encounters, movements, memories and imaginings. Methodologically, such dynamics are not necessarily 'observable' at any particular moment. When planning my fieldwork I was unsure how I might approach understanding these aspects of space, and thought about using film or incorporating movement and touch into the research process. In fact, as will become clear, in the end I worked primarily through my own participation in the two groups' activities, rather than initiating new kinds of engagement with spaces. Nonetheless it was taking a broadly ethnographic approach that allowed me to develop such approaches to 'public space'.

However, despite the potentials of this approach, it is important to acknowledge that ethnographies are not necessarily motivated by such understandings of space. Indeed anthropologists have traditionally defined themselves as 'participant-observers' in any fieldwork situation, and indeed where they have focused on public spaces, the emphasis often seems, again, to be on observation. Again this potentially gives primary importance to the visual, although perhaps in a slightly different mode from the writing within cultural geography that I referred to above. For example, Setha Low (1999b) in her writing on two plazas in Costa Rica, worked through intensive observation, producing maps of behaviour and activity and photographs as well as quantitative data on the use of the plazas. Although this was followed up by a phase of talking to users, interviewing decision-makers and an examination of historical documents, her analysis still stems primarily from what can be seen happening on the plazas, which she understands as 'visible public forums for the expression of cultural conflict' (134). For example, she notes the presence of evangelical healers and preachers in one of the squares, and suggests that, 'these Protestant practitioners and their adherents can be seen as symbolically contesting the religious hegemony of the Catholic cathedral that flanks the eastern perimeter' (124). Here it remains unclear whether this is what others on the plaza felt and understood to be happening, as well as being Low's analysis. The effect therefore is a somewhat distanced perspective on the spaces.

By contrast, as I have emphasised, my interest in ethnography stemmed from an understanding of space as actively produced and practised, and

this meant developing more intimate relationships with those people involved in such production. As well as highlighting a particular set of empirical issues, choosing to do an ethnography of community groups, rather than passers-by or temporary inhabitants of a particular space, allowed me to develop different kinds of relationships with research participants. Indeed for me ethnography crucially involves developing trust and dialogue with people over time, rather than observing behaviour. Understood in this way, there is clearly a strong relationship between current interests in human geography and ethnography as a practice (see Cloke et al 2002: 169-205), in that it allows researchers to explore the kind of intimate geographies that make up places, which may be harder to access through other kinds of methods.

In relation to the topic of public space in particular I also felt that there were political and ethical reasons for not proceeding primarily through observing 'strangers'. Those in outdoor or 'public' spaces are already subject to many forms of surveillance that are clearly bound up with strategies of state and corporate control (Fyfe 2004). Methods involving making maps and recording movements in the ways that I describe above (eg Low 1999) seemed to risk replicating such approaches. This was perhaps a particular issue in the kind of settings where I undertook fieldwork, which are often popularly depicted as spaces of deviant behaviour (Hastings and Dean 2000) or, in policy language, 'the socially excluded'. In order to overcome this sense of discursive over-determination it felt necessary to move away, at least to some extent, from detached observation. Therefore, although my fieldwork did involve

observation, this was generally within the context of shared activity with a group of people I knew, which I believe situated me differently in relation to the spaces, as I will go on to discuss.

Also, more practically, it would have been hard to hang around as an 'observer' in the neighbourhoods, in the way that Low did, as the outdoor spaces were not generally well-used, and I would have felt highly conspicuous and perhaps vulnerable. In fact, in proceeding through an engagement with the groups rather than particular spaces, as will become clear, my definition of public spaces in these contexts quickly moved beyond these outdoor spaces. Therefore my 'field' itself was emergent over time, as well as my research questions and methods.¹⁰ This in itself demonstrates the capacity of ethnography to disrupt conventional relationships between theoretical categories and research practices, a point to which I will return at the end of this chapter.

2.2.2 Ethnography and critique

In the previous section I set out reasons for choosing ethnography as an approach, which I developed within my fieldwork context in particular ways. However, whilst I want to argue for its productiveness as a means of researching public space, it would be misleading to suggest that my methods were therefore unproblematic or that my relationships with participants straightforward. I will focus on these relationships more specifically in the following sections. In this section I want to think more

¹⁰ Parr (2001b:185) makes similar observations about her ethnography of spaces used by those with mental health problems: an office space which had begun as 'a place to gather information' became the subject of research in itself, as a place where social relations were 'negotiated and performed'.

critically about ethnography, in general, and how, to return to the Denzin quote (from Silverman 2001) cited earlier, it symbolically constitutes an area of study and defines the subjectivity of the researcher, in ways which may be quite problematic, as well as productive. This ties in with some of the issues touched on in the introduction to this chapter.

Indeed whilst ethnography is now being enthusiastically embraced, with good reason, by disciplines such as geography (Lees 2003), within anthropology itself the last thirty years have seen a sustained internal critique of its structures of thought and practice (Asad 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Kullick and Wilson 1995; James et al 1997; Stocking 1983; Clifford 1997; Spencer 2001). A central concern has been around 'power relations' between the researcher and the researched, and particularly how these are played out through the representation of 'other cultures' in anthropological texts.¹¹ These issues are brought into particular focus by the context of the 'colonial encounter' (Asad 1973) with which anthropology has historically been linked. However, this does not negate the importance of such concerns elsewhere, given that much ethnographic research still involves working with those who are seen as structurally 'less powerful' than the researcher. In particular there is a long tradition of urban ethnography (see essays in Sennett 1969; also Brunt 2001; Deegan 2001) within deprived neighbourhoods, which potentially brings with it equally troubling issues of power and representation.

¹¹ See Clifford and Marcus' (1986) hugely influential collection in particular.

Such a critique has led to more self-reflexive and self-critical approaches to ethnography, with less certainty about the authority of the knowledge produced. This is not to suggest that ethnography has ever been a straightforward practice for researchers, but that increasingly 'behind the scenes, "corridor talk"' (Cloke et al 2002: 191) about its difficulties have become part of overt debates and publications. Feminist perspectives in particular have been crucial in disrupting the authority of ethnographic narratives as they have been presented.¹²

Therefore, whilst in my discussion in the previous section I underlined the potential for ethnography to enable closeness or even intimacy with research participants, a more critical approach (Katz 1994) would see it as revolving around dislocation and distance, in both material and more conceptual ways. Having delineated certain localities or groups as 'the field', the researcher moves between this field and spaces of home or academic life. This may be in stark contrast to less mobile research participants, reflecting their economic and social disadvantage. Cindi Katz (1994: 68) discussing fieldwork in both Sudan and Harlem, suggests the voyeurism in researchers' accounts of fieldwork in poor, exotic or perhaps dangerous areas, 'the scholarly equivalent of war stories'. Fieldwork in deprived urban neighbourhoods may hold a similarly problematic allure, seeming to offer the researcher the potential to encounter an exotic 'other' culture. Indeed more broadly, ethnography as a practice seems to rely on

¹² See for example essays in Behar and Gordon (1995), Moss (2002), Nast (1994a), and for an overview Skeggs (2001). Indeed, beyond the particular references which I refer to throughout the chapter, it is worth noting that my overall approach to analysing my fieldwork experiences here is informed by what I would classify as feminist perspectives.

conceiving of bounded communities with unproblematic links between people, places and culture (see Cloke et al 2002: 183-4).

Nonetheless, categories such as the 'neighbourhood' do continue to have power and effects in the 'real world' as well as in academic accounts, as I will discuss in some detail in Chapter Four in relation to my research context. Clearly these categories need to be understood as partial and contested, and as Cook and Crang (1995: 7) point out, 'as much as the researcher is embedded in ... multiple contexts, so are the subjects of his/her research'. For example, to turn briefly to my own fieldwork experiences, I was very aware of a sense of my own mobility during my fieldwork, in material and embodied ways. Throughout the time I was undertaking the research I travelled between Stoke-on-Trent and home in London on a weekly basis, as well as spending time at academic seminars, conferences and reading groups, and travelling abroad for holidays. My constant travel was often remarked upon by research participants, and I often felt embarrassed by it, as it seemed to emphasise my outsider status and the differences in economic and class terms between us.

However, my research participants also travelled locally and abroad on holiday. Jill, the chair of the Westfields group was studying for a diploma at Staffordshire University on the voluntary and community sector. Whilst most of the group members had lived for a long time in their neighbourhoods, this was not exclusively the case. Karen, the treasurer of the Westfields group mentioned to me on one occasion that until recently

she had lived and worked in Essex. I no doubt looked surprised, and I think she told me in the full knowledge that I would not expect this.

Indeed, as I shall go on to demonstrate in the discussion of my experiences in the rest of this chapter, I found that any assumptions I held about the lives of my research participants were frequently challenged. This suggests that there are different ways of entering 'the field' and encountering participants, which are not necessarily pre-determined by existing power relations or voyeuristic gazes. Whilst it would be wrong to imagine that an 'outsider' status can ever be overcome, listening to, and learning from, research participants is potentially an extremely powerful aspect of ethnography for the researcher. Furthermore this is not just the case for recent, self-reflexive or critical ethnographies. Whilst ethnography such as that undertaken by the Chicago School of Ethnographers (Deegan 2001; Sennett 1969) may seem problematic in lots of ways now, it was driven by goals of developing empathy with the poor, and can be viewed as 'an early encounter with difference' (Bridge 2005: 68), which should not be easily dismissed. The embodied aspect of ethnography, the fact of physically spending extended periods of time with people, reliant on them at least socially if not in other more material ways, almost inevitably produces dialogue and understanding that break down clear subject categories and relations of power.

This of course does not guarantee anything about what kind of knowledge, or forms of representation, will eventually result from the fieldwork. As noted earlier, issues of representation have been the subject of particular

critique within anthropology, and attempts have been made to disrupt the textual authority of ethnographers' accounts through particular writing strategies (Tyler 1986). Nonetheless, writing for an academic audience, away from the immediate voices and demands of participants, the researcher is perhaps more obviously 'in control' at the stage of analysing and writing up fieldwork material. Judith Stacey writes (cited in Skeggs 2001: 436) that whilst ethnographic methods may appear collaborative, 'the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants'. At the same time academic texts will circulate within broader fields of knowledge, perhaps in unforeseeable ways. To the extent that this is possible therefore, the researcher has a responsibility to consider what regimes of representation and thought the fieldwork material will contribute to.

In the case of my research project, such issues tie in with points made earlier about popular depictions of deviant behaviour and the 'socially excluded' as located in the kinds of environment where I did research. Whilst I clearly did not want to perpetuate such negative stereotypes, I did not want to naively romanticise 'working class lives' and struggle either. Discussing some 'classic' geographical ethnographies of the past thirty years, Cloke et al (2002: 171-180) draw out the ways in they contrast popular 'representations' of disadvantaged groups and places with the 'reality' gleaned from fieldwork accounts. Although this may have been an important move at the time, it might now be important to recognise that all representations have political effects and implications and that this

complicates an idea of ethnographic knowledge as essentially 'truth-telling'.

Considering the effects of ethnographic representations in this way is clearly linked to more over-arching questions about the value and impacts of academic knowledge. Indeed as Smith (2001) argues, considering the 'political' effects of research may be more pressing than the personal ethical dilemmas which ethnographers often focus on. However, asking about the extent to which such knowledge contributes to social change involves huge issues of institutional frameworks and practices, which may be irresolvable within the context of a particular research project. A first step to thinking this through might be to ask whether a particular fieldwork account could be actively harmful for participants or others. Stuart Kirsch (2004), discussing the relationship between anthropology and political advocacy, suggests that ethnography has a tendency to either expose too much or too little – in other words to either strategically ignore issues which do not fit into a particular line of political argument, or to expose weaknesses, conflict or contradictions among groups who may be already politically vulnerable. This also raises issues of 'informed consent', and the extent to which a research project is undertaken with the understanding of participants about its potential outcomes, even if trust and dialogue have been developed during the fieldwork itself (Davies 1999; Murphy & Dingwall 2001).

Indeed Kirsch (2004) also suggests that the emergent nature of academic knowledge more broadly may be unhelpful, even actively negative in

contexts requiring urgent political action. As he writes (2004: 15), following Macdonald (2004), 'the political requirement for certainty may be incompatible with how contemporary ethnography typically questions meta-narratives, encourages multiple voices, and keeps possibilities open rather than foreclosing them'. Elsewhere Kirsch (2002) discusses his engagement as an 'activist' in an area of Papua New Guinea suffering from environment destruction by a mining company. Maybe because of the particular context he describes this as a fairly clear role, but for most researchers, an awareness of the 'space between research and action' (Marshall 2002: 177) is perhaps a more ongoing and uncertain issue.

For me, as I imagine for many ethnographers, I found a balance around this within the everyday interactions and negotiations of my fieldwork, but this does not mean that this issue is resolved in the long term, now that I am no longer actively present in the fieldwork sites. Throughout the project I have wanted to produce practical, and policy-orientated, as well as theoretical insights. However both Doreen Mattingly (2001) and Maureen Reed (2002), discussing research of an 'applied' or 'policy relevant' nature, explore feelings of ambivalence or even failure when considering the projects with hindsight. Reed describes how a row erupted in a local newspaper about her research project after it was over, with a former participant criticising its failure to produce jobs or increase prosperity in the area. Although she felt that 'mutual understanding' developed from the project, she recognises that 'mutual understanding does not feed a family. And when research does not feed a family in a

public policy context where communities believe they are threatened by actual or imminent starvation, processes of trust-building erode' (144).

2.3 Locating fieldwork and negotiating access

The previous section sketched out some of the complexities and difficulties thrown up by ethnography as a practice. In the remainder of this chapter I am going to discuss how such issues played out within the context of my fieldwork, and explore the strategies with which I worked through them. Whilst the issues I discuss are relevant to other ethnographic projects, there is clearly also a particularity to the process I worked through. Practical details of my activities throughout the fieldwork period (centrally October 2003-October 2004) are summarised in the Appendix. This process began with choosing locations for my fieldwork and gaining access to participants.

Cook and Crang (1995: 16) suggest that researchers need to consider what 'aspects of identity' allow them to gain access to research participants. In the first instance it was my previous experience of working with small-scale community groups (see Preface) that gave me both practical contacts and also the confidence to engage with the groups in the initial stages. Nonetheless, as the fieldwork progressed other aspects of myself perhaps became more important to my ongoing relationships, as I shall go on to discuss.

I therefore obtained contact details of 'successful' community groups¹³ doing projects around outdoor spaces, from various national umbrella and network organisations. From this I wrote introductory letters to around ten groups in order to find out more about their work. I followed these up with phone calls to those who sounded particularly interesting and made visits to four groups in London, Stoke-on-Trent and Walsall during the summer of 2003. At this stage I wanted to select two or three groups whose work I would follow over the course of the coming year and initially I did not have a clear sense of where such groups might be geographically located. Broadly I wanted to work with groups who were doing projects around 'public space' (which I understood at that stage in terms of outdoor spaces); who were strongly locally-led rather than having been set up by local government initiatives; who had sufficient local support to sustain activity, and whom I generally felt supportive of and felt I would enjoy working with.

It is important to note here that in the past I had come across community groups that were essentially run by a small number of individuals, who lacked support from other residents, or deliberately excluded some groups from their activities, such as young people and ethnic minorities. Indeed such issues continue to be important criticisms often levelled at community groups, or indeed locally-defined politics more generally, and they are

¹³ By 'community group' I mean a small-scale locally-based and orientated organisation undertaking projects to improve the area, led by residents. In some cases these organisations are also called 'residents' associations', although residents' associations are often less active than the kind of groups I was interested in, for example only meeting quarterly to discuss issues which are then reported to the local council. The Westfields group is indeed called a 'residents' association' although they often commented that they did much more than most residents' associations. The Riverlands group, who had similar feelings, began as a 'residents' association' and then renamed themselves 'residents' community association'.

undoubtedly important to explore.¹⁴ However, for this research project my primary interest was in exploring the ways in which small-scale community groups had the potential to be strong and inclusive forces for change locally, to produce public space in certain ways, and so I chose to work with groups that I felt showed this. My selection of groups was therefore partial, although I don't believe that the groups I chose were exceptional. Nonetheless as I hope will become clear, as the fieldwork progressed it continued to raise difficult questions and issues around both the potentials and the limits of community groups as political entities.

My initial contact with the Riverlands group came about because they had received a grant through a scheme which I had been involved in setting up. I therefore already knew some of the people they were working with, which helped to establish some common ground between us in the first instance. On my first visit to Riverlands I was met by Sandra, the chair of the group, Mick, her husband, and three of the other committee members. It was clear then, as it was subsequently, that Sandra and Mick were at the core of the group, supported by a committee of around ten, and a network of other local volunteers.

As discussed in the Preface, the group are based in a 'community house' in a neighbourhood, Riverlands, on the outskirts of Stoke-on-Trent. As I will go on to describe in Chapter Four, the area has distinctive pre-fabricated housing, including the community house, as well as lots of

¹⁴ Certainly these issues remained live during my fieldwork, and they came up especially during interviews with local government officers who work with community groups (see Chapter Three). In Chapter Four I discuss some broader issues around neighbourhood-based politics.

green and open space. The group, which had established itself with a broad remit around improving local residents' lives (as I shall discuss in Chapter Five) had been running for around a year when I first visited them. However, at the time of my visit they had only acquired the community house a couple of months previously. Nonetheless they had already refurbished it and redesigned and planted the garden. They were then in the process of planning a children and young people's play area in another part of the estate.

I was absolutely amazed by their energy and confidence on this first visit, and by the breadth of their activities and commitment to the local area. I wrote in my notes from the visit that they gave off an 'amazing infectious enthusiasm', as they showed me around the house and told me what was happening and what they had planned. The group already had a young person's forum attached to the main group, and had many further plans for other projects and activities locally, from a wildlife area to inter-generational activities and a midwinter lantern parade. I remember standing in the kitchen on that first visit, having a cup of tea and talking to Sandra about my PhD. I felt that something clicked into place, and that this was the right place to do my research. Subsequently there were many occasions when I felt less relaxed and more unsure of myself, but I did not regret having made that decision. Indeed, as I will go on to explore, there were many points during my fieldwork when simply trusting my instincts and hunches seemed the best strategy for negotiating the many decisions and dilemmas thrown up.

Shortly after that visit I wrote to the Riverlands group and asked them whether they would be prepared to participate in my research. I tried to set out what I thought that would mean for them in terms of my spending time there, observing meetings and so on, as well as them participating in interviews, discussion groups and possibly other research activities. I also tried to set out what would happen to the material I gathered from working with them, in terms of my thesis and the possibility of other publications. I suggested at that stage that I would write up the fieldwork in a way which gave them anonymity, because I felt that the research was likely to touch on controversy and conflict which could be damaging to them.¹⁵ Sandra quickly agreed to participating in the research, although at that stage neither of us quite knew what the process would entail. Sandra was generally always willing to get the group involved with any schemes or activities that were on offer locally and which might be of benefit to them, from community arts projects to training schemes and meetings.

Over the following months I thought through the practical and logistical issues around my fieldwork, as well as the intellectual coherence of the project, and eventually settled on basing all my fieldwork in Stoke-on-Trent. This was partly a practical decision, because I was very keen to work with the Riverlands group and realised that being based in two parts of the country was likely to be very difficult. However I also felt that Stoke as a context presented advantages. As previously suggested, in its size and environment it could hardly be more different from cities such as New York and London, from where issues of public space, and indeed urban

¹⁵ I have made places and individuals anonymous throughout the thesis: I discuss my decision to do this in Section 2.6 of this chapter.

change more broadly have often been considered by researchers. I was keen to research 'ordinary' or everyday spaces, not those that were already understood as highly politicised or significant. Nonetheless, Stoke does have a particular economic, social and political climate (as I go on to discuss in Chapter Three), which perhaps makes it perhaps an especially challenging location from which to think about issues of urban change. Possibly because of all this, it has not been the subject of much previous academic research (although see essays in Edensor 2002). Staffordshire University also offered me deskpace and library access whilst I was there, which gave me good links to local expertise and perspectives.

I therefore set out to try and find a second case study group in Stoke with which I could work. In order to do this I set up meetings with the local Groundwork Trust, with Stoke Voluntary Action Bureau (an umbrella organisation for voluntary and community groups) and with staff at Staffordshire University who had contacts with local community groups. From this I arranged visits to six further community groups. In particular I considered working with groups both on East Town (the neighbouring estate to Riverlands) and in Canalside, an area receiving significant regeneration funding for housing. At various points I had difficulties getting hold of people and setting up meetings, and this process became rather protracted. Indeed I finally met the Westfields group, who became my second case study group, in February 2004, and after that it took some weeks to establish the project. However the meetings I had with other

groups and individuals in themselves provided useful material (see Chapters Three and Four).

The Westfields group are also based in a 'community house', a council-owned bungalow. The estate, which I shall describe in more detail in Chapter Four, is similarly on the periphery of Stoke-on-Trent, and again is made up of post-war housing with areas of green space between sections of housing. The group had been going for around three years when I began my research with them, but had not moved into the bungalow until a year after their establishment. Again, Jill, the chairperson, seemed to be the main organisational force behind the group, although the committee of around eight and other volunteers were clearly also very active.

Like the Riverlands space, the Westfields bungalow has a very informal and relaxed atmosphere, with people 'dropping in' throughout the day. On my first visit I had arranged to meet Jill, but several committee members and the chair of another local community group were also around in the 'office' space, as well as some small children who were brought in briefly. Again, I felt immediately relaxed in the environment. The women were extremely talkative and we ended up having a group discussion about their work. Like Riverlands, they undertake a wide variety of projects and activities around the estate. I was very struck again by their energy and the range of projects they were involved in, including providing IT training for local people and running an initiative for young people to help older people with their gardens, as well as putting on lots of social activities and events. I was also very struck by the thoughtfulness of Jill, the chair. Like

the Riverlands group, the fact that they worked from a specific and accessible space (rather than, for example, from members' houses, as other such groups often do) seemed to give me a reasonably defined basis from which to begin fieldwork.

By the time I formally approached the Westfields group to ask them to take part in my research project I had already been working with Riverlands for four months, and was clearer that I wanted to work with the groups as a 'volunteer' in their activities, an issue I will discuss in the following sections. Therefore this is what I proposed to Westfields, obviously explaining that this would be a way for me to do research with them. They agreed to this, as Jill said, 'we always need help', although she seemed a bit uncertain about how I would fit in with the other volunteers. Again I tried to explain as clearly as I could what my research was about, what would happen to the material, and how they would be represented.

As already noted, I found these initial stages of negotiating access to the two groups relatively straightforward, I think partly because of my previous experiences of meeting community groups and working with them on a professional basis. In these early meetings I had a fairly clear role as a 'researcher', and it was obvious to the groups that I wanted to find out some straightforward information about them, for example what activities they put on, and how they came to be set up. The groups were able to articulate answers to these questions fairly easily. However, as time went on, I was aware that my presence with them might seem more and not less strange, and that we would have to re-negotiate our relationships as

something more complex and uncertain than that between researchers and subjects. As my fieldwork period approached (which I began in October 2003), I felt anxious about what might happen. As Heidi Nast (1994: 58) writes, fieldwork is 'an imposition', and I felt unsure about what the groups would get 'in return' for this imposition. On a more everyday level I felt worried that they might 'reject' me or that my presence might cause conflict within the groups.

2.4 Interviews and contextual fieldwork

Alongside the ethnographic fieldwork with two community groups, I also interviewed policy officials, attended meetings and spent other time informally with people who were not directly members of the two groups, but were linked in some way. Centrally I was interested in how local government officials understood the role and contribution of community groups in bringing about change, and how far central government policy on this influenced their actions (see Chapter Three). I was also interested in finding out more particularly and empirically about the local politics of each neighbourhood in which the groups were based, as a way of deepening my understanding of their work. As well as meetings I did a small amount of archival research at the city library, which had copies of both current and previous policy documents relating to the two neighbourhoods, as well as some material on the history of both areas.

Near the start of my fieldwork, before I began working with the Westfields group, I concentrated on this in relation to the Riverlands area. In both

areas I was guided by what I heard from the groups in terms of officials or other people locally that they were in touch with. At Riverlands, an important context for their work was the very large neighbouring estate, East Town (see Chapter Four), and I undertook several interviews with workers there, as well as with residents who were involved in two local community groups. I also did some interviewing in a separate neighbourhood, Canalside, where as already noted, I was considering concentrating on one of the community groups as my second case study group.

As with my initial meetings with the two community groups, I found these meetings fairly straightforward in comparison to the core of my ethnographic research. Policy officials in particular clearly felt comfortable with the idea of an 'interview', and indeed many of them told me that they had been interviewed for previous research projects. My interviews with council officers often lasted much longer than the hour time-slot I suggested, and I felt that they appreciated the chance to talk through some of the pressures and frustrations they experienced in their jobs. Nevertheless, they still clearly remained guarded on some level, for example not referring to individuals or groups by name, or choosing their words extremely carefully when they were aware of expressing a controversial view. However on a number of occasions they began to talk more freely once the tape-recorder had been switched off and the formal part of the 'interview' seemed to be over. Several times I noticed that whilst walking to the door or just chatting briefly after the interview, my interviewees also expected me to move away from a somewhat formal

position as a 'researcher', to ask me about my opinions on issues, my impressions of Stoke and so on.¹⁶ Therefore, even within the relatively structured and brief encounter of an interview I was aware of shifting subject positions and relationships.

Asides from these interviews, as mentioned, I also spent time attending other meetings and talking to council officers and workers more informally within the Westfields and Riverlands neighbourhoods. In particular, this informed my understanding of the relationships between the groups' projects and local government interventions. Within these settings, observing meetings in particular, professionals were potentially more 'exposed' than in interviews, in terms of being able to control the way they presented issues to me. Public meetings and consultations could always reveal tensions between local people and the council, and I experienced some hostility from officers around my presence in this setting. This could make for some uncomfortable occasions, although I feel that I was often there with a less negative or critical agenda than the officials imagined.¹⁷ Indeed I also met officials who were extremely helpful and open to spending time with me. For example, I met a group of trainee community development workers who were based in the Riverlands/East Town area, whom I got to know quite well. They actively invited me to meetings and alerted me to upcoming events.¹⁸ In whatever ways these relationships

¹⁶ See Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002, for discussion on such exchanges after interviews. I did not use such 'off-the-record' conversations directly as the basis for analysis, but of course they did inform my overall understanding of their positions and views.

¹⁷ This perhaps reflects both dominant understandings of the nature of academic research, as well as officers feeling (understandably) unwilling to expose weaknesses or problems with their work.

¹⁸ I think that this openness was due, at least in part, to their relatively junior status and to the fact that as trainees, they had less allegiance to the local authority.

developed though, they were ultimately less central to the research than my relationships with the two community groups, which raised a series of pressing ethical and personal issues on a more ongoing basis.

2.5 Fieldwork with Riverlands and Westfields

2.5.1 Finding an identity

As Cloke et al point out (2002: 194), ethnography involves challenges of 'identity management' for the researcher, although this phrase suggests a very controlled process. My own experience felt much more uncertain, during which I could not necessarily understand my own position or how it was being interpreted by others (Rose 1997). My role with the two groups ultimately had to be negotiated inter-subjectively with them, and I think at times that they felt as uncertain and tentative about this as I did.

Importantly, as should be apparent from the next two sections, ethnography involves multiple aspects of identity and experience, which exceed categories of 'researcher' and 'researched' (see Dowler 2001: 160). This is what makes such research productive and exciting, but also emotionally and ethically challenging.

As already discussed, I began my fieldwork with the Riverlands group feeling unsure and nervous about how my contact with them would work on a practical level. The group had a weekly programme of structured activities, mainly in the evenings, and mainly based at the community house. Throughout my fieldwork period I tried to visit each group at least

once a week, although there were occasional weeks when I didn't go up to Stoke, because of holidays or other commitments.

Initially I decided to plan these visits around 'interviews' with all the committee members and volunteers at Riverlands, as a way to get to know people and to have an excuse to come and visit as much as anything else. On these occasions I tried to exploit the period of time before and after interviews, when I would hang around in the rest of the house, watching what was going on and chatting more informally. I also ran informal 'discussion sessions' with some of the committee members, with elderly people and with a group of teenagers. Overall though, neither the interviews nor these discussion sessions were very successful, as I will go on to discuss.

Gradually I began just to 'drop in' unannounced to the house to talk to people and hang around, rather than endlessly calling Sandra to arrange 'meetings' or appointments. This I realised was much more in line with how the group would normally work. In any case I often found that when I did arrange to meet people they wouldn't turn up, or plans had somehow changed at the last minute. Communication within the group seemed to work through seeing each other at the house or on the street, so the only way for me to be in touch with the group successfully was to be there.¹⁹

During this period I did occasionally help out, for example at the winter lantern parade which took place soon after I started, but generally I felt

¹⁹ This in itself is suggestive of the kinds of informal dynamics through which the groups operate, which I will explore in Chapters Five and Six.

very conscious of not having a clear role in relation to the group and of being an outsider. All around me there seemed to be frantic activity as the group members struggled to do everything they wanted to, whilst I felt that I was contributing little, often not even managing to understand much of what was happening for research purposes. I often felt that I was trying to break into, and be accepted by, a group of friends, without success. I had planned to initiate some kind of project with them, perhaps involving video, but I didn't feel confident enough to do this or clear enough about what the purpose of such a project might be. However, in February during a committee meeting there was discussion of the need for more volunteers, and this clarified my decision to put myself forward as a 'volunteer' and to shift my relationship to the group in this way. I had considered doing this before, but had felt wary of getting 'too involved' and also that I might be usurping local residents' positions. I knew that encouraging and training local volunteers was part of what the group did in order to benefit the 'community'.

Having made this move, though, it seemed the right thing to do. The group particularly needed volunteers to help out at sessions with teenagers, so over the next seven months I worked with a group of mainly boys on an allotment, and with a group of mainly girls who were doing cookery sessions. I also went on a couple of trips with teenagers away from the estate, one to the theatre and one to an amusement park. Besides this I helped at arts and crafts and play sessions for younger children, and continued to attend other meetings and events in more of an 'observer' capacity. This enabled me to get to know both children and

young people locally, as well as other volunteers and committee members. More broadly, it brought me into new kinds of relationships with the groups overall, as I shall go on to explore in the next section of this chapter (see Section 2.5.2 below).

By the time I started fieldwork with the Westfields group I had already begun working as a volunteer for Riverlands, so I approached them with this as a clearer proposition. However, this role was somewhat less straightforward with them for various reasons. Firstly, the programme of weekly activities they run directly is less extensive. Apart from a twice-weekly 'kids club' they run training and courses through a local higher education provider, with sessions led by professional teachers within the group's buildings. It wasn't possible to 'drop in' to these sessions as either a volunteer or participant, although given that they weren't run by the group members by themselves they would perhaps have been of less interest to me anyway.

Instead, the work of the Westfields' volunteers is based more directly around time spent 'in the office', which is open four mornings a week for them to do administrative and management tasks, as well as be on hand for residents to drop in with problems or issues. I therefore volunteered to come in at least once a week to spend time in the office. Jill initially wanted me to work on some quite strategic management tasks, specifically helping them acquire charitable status, going through a recruitment procedure and writing a business plan. She clearly felt daunted by these tasks and hoped that my presence would get them

moving. However, I felt quite uncertain about how far I should get involved with such issues, and not in a position to push them through the group as an outsider. After some negotiation I therefore did some initial research on the legal and bureaucratic procedures involved in the first two of these tasks, and handed over the information to Jill, which was perhaps not ultimately very helpful.

On the business plan, I ran two discussion sessions for the group around examining the group's priorities and planning ahead. The first session was very successful and also useful for me. The second session was less successful. I essentially reported back to them what they had told me previously, highlighting some tentative suggestions about their future. However, perhaps not surprisingly given that they didn't know me, they were quite defensive about this process. In the end I just wrote up these sessions and went no further with the business plan idea. In any case, the group were in the middle of a period of massive uncertainty around the future of their buildings, so for me, and I think for others, it felt like the wrong time to be making detailed plans for the future.

I then did some work for the Westfields group on a newsletter, which was one of the issues that had come out of our discussion sessions as a priority and appeared a fairly straightforward project to take on. However my working on this seemed to cause some friction among the group. Newsletters were supposed to be the responsibility of one of the committee members, who had become less involved around that time. I never really understood what happened, but I upset or offended her in

some way and the copy I got together ended up languishing on the computer and was never printed up. I saw this as my own failure and felt guilty about it, and as if I had reached a kind of 'dead end' in terms of my involvement as a volunteer with the group. I had also found in these early stages that some of the committee members were somewhat hostile and for example, were not happy with me sitting in on committee meetings. Jill, the chair, suffered from serious health problems and when she wasn't around I found it more difficult to fit in.

One of the other difficulties I had found with the office work was that for much of the time the office was really functioning as social space, with volunteers sitting around chatting, joined by others when they dropped in. At first I tried to treat it as a 'work environment', colonising one of the desks and trying to conduct serious discussions with group members about what I was working on, but this was almost impossible, and I found this very frustrating at times. Of course it was actually the very informality of the groups, the cross-over into family and social life, that I was interested in for my research. I came to realise that I therefore needed to become more relaxed in my own approach to working with them, to be 'responsive to... different "ways of being" in time and space' (Parr 1998: 30). Indeed this is a key issue for any ethnography.

However, because of the nature of the work I had been asked to do for the group I was sometimes approaching my involvement with them as something quite different from that of a researcher, more to do with being a 'professional' who could offer them certain kinds of support. Indeed this

was how my role was often constructed by the group, at least initially, and was also how my presence tended to be understood by other professionals or officials whom I came into contact with. My conversations with such paid workers tended to emphasise my own distance from the groups, through the way they spoke to me or what kind of perspective it was assumed that I would have on the groups or the neighbourhoods. An example of this was at the Westfields Christmas party when, in a room full of people, I was approached by two community police officers who could clearly tell that I didn't 'fit in' with other local residents. When I explained what I was doing they started talking to me in very negative terms about the area and people in it, in hushed voices, in ways they clearly would not have done to residents. Of course many other professionals I encountered had a much more supportive approach to the area and the problems encountered by people living in it (see Chapter Three) but this incident served as a reminder that identities 'in the field' are constructed by others around you as much as controlled by the researcher.

That said, by the time of this Christmas party I felt established in my role with the Westfields group as a 'volunteer' and tended to be introduced to others in those terms, rather than as a 'student' or 'from the university'. Indeed, once I had realised that the office sessions were not really working out I started just to drop in socially at the bungalow, as others did, and to help out at the kids' club from time to time. Also as summer approached the group began to run other activities, in particular a children's play scheme, and to prepare for a carnival which was their major event of the year. On the day of the carnival I worked as a steward. Similarly later in

the year I helped out with preparing for and running a Hallowe'en party as well as the Christmas party and concert. These events involved much more practical and immediate tasks, which, as at Riverlands, enabled me to interact in new ways with group members. It is these more positive feelings of interactions and participation that I will explore in the next section.

2.5.2 The feeling of participation

With both groups, as indicated, I was able to move from feeling self-conscious and frustrated to becoming much more relaxed, and fitting into the rhythms and patterns of their way of working and interacting. In retrospect I see this as about more than just becoming more familiar with them or even a shift in what I was practically doing around the groups, but a shift in my sense of what it meant to do ethnography with them. Earlier on I understood my research as an essentially discursive practice, in which I would explore meanings and uses of place through intersubjective exchanges around my research questions, as well as my own observations. However, whilst at times I was able to negotiate meanings and understanding in an overt way with research participants, this was not always possible; as already noted, my initial interviews and discussion sessions were not very successful.

Indeed on occasion verbal communication seemed to break down completely. I remember asking one volunteer whether he had been involved in any 'regeneration' projects before. He looked at me nervously and asked 'what's regeneration?'. On another occasion, as already

mentioned, I tried to conduct a discussion session with a group of teenagers at Riverlands, in which I asked them to draw maps of the area, and talk about their feelings about it. They essentially refused to do this, and even when they started to talk about the area, and one girl to draw a map, there seemed to be very little to say (see Jupp forthcoming).

I certainly do not want to suggest that it was impossible to discuss my research topics with participants, but equally it would be wrong to say that I negotiated my way around such silences through further conversation or other kinds of joint attempts to produce meaning. Rather I came to feel that ethnographic fieldwork, at least in my context, was made possible not through complex negotiations around meanings, knowledges and power relations (although these were present), but through the simple fact of being present together over time, and sharing experiences in an embodied and immediate way, what David Crouch (2001) calls 'the feeling of doing'. Hester Parr (1998, 2001a, 2001b) has drawn attention to the centrality of bodily experience within research and argues that 'the body is as present, important and concrete to the research process as the tape recorder' (1998: 35). In my experience it was a kind of bodily co-presence with my research participants which enabled us to develop something which might be called 'trust' (see discussion in Banks 2001: 113-114) or 'confidence' but is somehow a very basic component in forming relationships and enabling communication between people. Without this, I believe that many of the political and ethical issues surrounding the relationship between researcher and participants in ethnography would remain insurmountable.

As a volunteer, such shared experience was multi-sensual and strongly physical, whether it was digging an allotment together or picking up litter at the carnival. There was also often a real pleasure in such embodied experiences. I remember relaxing together with other volunteers at the end of the day of the Westfields carnival; it had been absolutely boiling hot and everyone was exhausted. Jill came up to me and gave me a hug and said to a woman who was there from a community arts organisation, 'Ellie always gets thrown in at the deep end!'. I think in using this very physical image she wanted to communicate the idea of my bodily immersion in the group's activities, more than just the fact of the work being difficult.

Of course, it would be possible to understand such experiences as essentially a strategy for me to develop trust with participants, whereby research questions and issues remain within a separate discursive realm, even if research practice is understood as embodied. However, over time, this sense of a separation dissolved for me. I did not feel that I was somehow acting, or taking on a role in order to do the real research, but rather that the work I did as a volunteer was a contribution both to the groups' activities and to my own research. Indeed, as should be clear from my discussions in both Chapter One and the start of this chapter, these experiences fundamentally shaped my views of how 'public space' might be understood in such contexts, as produced by material and embodied practices as much as 'deliberately meaningful' (Bridge 2005: 85) or representational interventions. In terms of research practice, they also affected how I thought about 'participation' in research (see Jupp

forthcoming). Towards the end of my fieldwork I felt profoundly affected by the experience, and began to see new potentialities and feel new pleasures in very everyday, shared interactions with others around me.

Having said this, one must also be wary of 'romanticising' embodied and sensory experiences, as if they somehow exist beyond the discursive structures of the social and political world. This also ties in with my discussion of the critical debate about 'non-representational theory' in Chapter One, in which I pointed out that spaces still need to be understood as produced discursively and symbolically, even whilst paying attention to other kinds of practices. Indeed I believe that much of my fieldwork experience was shaped by the fact that I was often working with children and young people, with whom more material and embodied engagements are somehow socially sanctioned as acceptable. This in turn draws adults into new kinds of relationships both with each other and with the material world. Many small incidents during my fieldwork highlighted this for me. For example, at the Westfields kids' club I remember working with Claire, one of the committee members, helping a little boy to stick together crepe paper to make a dragon and laughing and joking with each other, an incident that I discuss in Chapter Five.

However, such engagements with children also raise problematic ethical and political issues. At times I sensed that, as a woman, I was 'trusted' to work with children in a way that I think would have been more difficult had

I been male.²⁰ I also felt that these children were potentially particularly vulnerable given that some of them were away from their parents.²¹ On one occasion at the Westfields kids club I had been sewing a Hallowe'en costume for a little girl of around six. Once the outfit was finished and she had put it on she asked me to help her look in the mirror, which she couldn't reach. I went into the bathroom with her and lifted her up so that she could look, and she ran back into the room delighted. This incident lasted about thirty seconds, but afterwards I suddenly felt uneasy about what I had done. I knew about basic 'child protection' and that you were not supposed to touch children or more particularly be on your own with them.

This was probably a mistake on my part, although I would stress that the general culture of childcare around the group was relaxed. There tended to be extended family groups at these sessions, including aunts, cousins, grandparents and so on, and people interacted with each other's children in a fairly fluid way. At Riverlands in particular, which worked within quite a small geographical area, younger children nearly always had a parent, or an aunt or uncle or grandparent present at the sessions. However, over the summer there was a somewhat more formal play scheme set up, run jointly by council play workers and Riverlands volunteers, which drew on a wider catchment area of children, who were often dropped off by parents

²⁰ This suggests the gendered dynamics which came into play at times during my fieldwork, although as a number of commentators have pointed out, shared gender doesn't necessarily guarantee identification or override other forms of 'difference' between researcher and researched: see Gilbert 1994 and Dowler 2001.

²¹ Although I did go through a police check process, this seemed to be held up by the fact that I had got married without changing my name. I therefore did not get official 'clearance' by the time I was working as a volunteer.

at the start of the sessions. I was very much encouraged by Sandra to come and volunteer at some of these sessions, which took place four days a week over the summer holidays, as they needed lots of help.

However after three sessions I decided not to attend any more. Although the play workers and the other volunteers knew who I was and what I was doing, I started to feel uncomfortable about my presence. There were fewer adults present than in the sessions at the community house and in many cases the children's parents didn't know me, unlike at the sessions run more directly by the groups. Here I was less concerned about 'child protection' issues than the more straightforward fact of my doing 'research' in that context. I often found myself as effectively the only adult with a small group of children, maybe painting or doing some kind of crafts, and children would inevitably talk to me about their lives and concerns. I had no intention of using what they told me directly in my research but I couldn't guarantee that it wouldn't influence my ideas or views. Although the idea of 'informed consent' is clearly not straightforward in ethnography, this situation felt so far from it that I decided to pull out. Indeed as both Parr (2001b) and Murphy and Dingwall (2001) point out, the line between overt and covert ethnographic research is not necessarily clear-cut.

Therefore I felt that shared embodied and material practices might actually generate too much trust or intimacy, which could be problematic. On another occasion, whilst working with a group of teenage boys on the allotment, I became aware that one of them was subtly humiliating me by constantly correcting what I was doing. I sensed that he was flirting with

me, or at the very least asserting some kind of masculine dominance. I actually found this funny at the time rather than threatening (he was only about fifteen), but I suppose if it had gone any further I might have felt vulnerable. Indeed whilst many approaches to ethics in research focus on the researcher as powerful and participants as vulnerable, there are equally moments, especially in ethnographic fieldwork, when the reverse may be true.

Indeed whilst the bodily nature of ethnographic research can both open up new forms of research practice, and generate new kinds of ethnographic material, it also makes ethnography more unpredictable and emotionally and ethically 'risky'. Although Parr suggests that the body can be understood as a 'tool' (2001a) within research, I never thought about my research practice in such instrumental terms. The physical nature of my participation in the groups' activities did create powerful connections and forms of interaction, but this in itself could also feel disconcerting for me. Over time I became aware that when I went to see the groups I would dress slightly differently, speak differently, and carry my body differently, although none of these were planned or conscious strategies.

Apart from particular activities, being present in the places where the group worked was clearly in itself an embodied feeling. As Heidi Nast (1998, quoted in Parr 2001a: 158) writes, 'Corporality and place partly produce the meaning and physicality of one another, making it difficult to ascertain where a body ends and a place begins'. Feeling uncomfortable and 'out of place' at the beginning of my fieldwork was difficult, yet feeling

more comfortable and relaxed could also be strange. As time went on I felt that I had established an identity and way of being in the field, yet in many ways this was different from the person whom I usually was. Given that I was still travelling between Stoke and my 'normal life' in London on a weekly basis, I imagine that such feelings must be even more powerful for those living with research participants over extended periods. As I noted right at the start of the chapter, such complex feelings meant that my fieldwork practice never became 'settled' or unproblematic, but rather consisted of continually shifting feelings and subject positions, which created different contexts for the production of ethnographic material.

2.5.3 Negotiating relationships

In the previous section I drew attention to the embodied feelings of participation that enabled me to explore the spaces of the groups and connect with research participants. Despite this, important aspects of my research remained grounded in talk and conversation, crucially my relationships with the two chairs of the groups, Sandra and Jill. In this section I want to reflect briefly on these specific relationships, as they formed an important context for the production of my fieldwork material. These relationships were very different, and this meant that I was positioned differently in relation to each of the groups. It is important to note at the outset that I liked and respected both of them very much and, as should be apparent, it was these relationships which essentially enabled my fieldwork to take place at all.

At the beginning, much of the time I spent with the two women was taken up with me asking them questions, to explain what they and the groups were doing and why. Indeed I was initially haunted by many questions about the groups to which I seemed unable to find answers. For example, there was one woman in the Riverlands group who just seemed to disappear from the scene, and I couldn't find out why. However, just as with time I came to realise that there were ways of doing ethnographic research which were not purely discursive, I also came to realise that I could only find out so much in relation to these specific questions. There undoubtedly were issues that group members were less keen to discuss with me than others, but then ultimately this is in the nature of all interaction. There were also questions that I had to which there were no straightforward 'answers'. My research therefore constituted a context, which was no more or less valid than any other (see Buckingham 2001), but which produced certain kinds of knowledges and subjectivities.

This was clearly demonstrated in my relationships with Sandra and Jill. Sandra had a tendency to talk to me in very positive terms about the work the Riverlands group were doing, how well the projects were going and so on. There is no doubt that the group are extremely successful, yet as the research progressed I began to find Sandra's, and to a lesser extent her partner Mick's, way of talking frustrating. I felt that underneath these accounts there must have been lots of problems for the group, which Sandra and Mick were deliberately obscuring from me. After a while I started to raise potential problems or criticisms of projects with them, but Sandra always dismissed these quickly. However with time I came to

understand two things about her approach: first of all, that Sandra is 'genuinely' very optimistic, determined and upbeat in relation to the group. She tended to see the positive potential in situations and in people, and this was what enabled her to carry on and to motivate others around her.

Secondly and more specifically, I think that her relationship with me played a part in affirming the group's achievements. I quite often dropped in for a cup of tea at the community house when it was just Sandra and Mick around. On these occasions Mick would often be dispatched upstairs to go and fetch certificates, newsletters, photographs or other items that signified their progress and success as a group. If I was just with one of them initially, when the other arrived they would ask 'Have you showed her X yet?' I believe that our conversations allowed both Sandra and Mick to articulate what they felt was important, and successful, about the group. On a number of occasions I got a strong sense of them formulating ways of expressing issues as we talked. During a conversation at the end of the fieldwork (which I taped), we were talking about their work with young people. Mick was talking very slowly and carefully about young people and their 'reputation' locally:

We don't want to paint a different picture so people can look at them in a different way, you know, if they want to paint a different picture of themselves, that's fine, you know, we'll... if we have to supply the paints and the brushes for them to paint a different picture that's ok.

Mick looked pleased when he had finished talking, and Sandra and I both laughed. There was a strong sense of him working out how he felt about this issue, which was a crucial one for the group, as he talked.

My conversations with Jill at Westfields had quite a different dynamic. Jill clearly felt that the group were in a difficult situation throughout the time I was doing the fieldwork, as I shall explore over subsequent chapters. She felt personally responsible for developing and sustaining it as an organisation over the long term, and, as already mentioned, she hoped that I would be able to help her with some of these issues. More generally she seemed to see me as a source of advice and expertise. I had many long phone conversations with her as well as in person, when she would talk about the difficulties faced by the group. In these conversations she often asked me for my opinion, what I would do in that situation and so on. I found this difficult, not so much because it compromised my 'neutrality' as a researcher, but because I didn't feel qualified to provide her with answers, or to meet her expectations as some kind of 'expert'. The fact that she was being so open about their difficulties made me feel this all the more strongly. Indeed as Samantha Punch (2001: 171) suggests, whilst ethnographers may spend time and energy developing trust with participants, the times when participants do 'open up' can also feel 'ethically uncomfortable'. During these conversations with Jill I just tried to be as honest as possible, and to say that I didn't know when that was the case. In fact, she didn't hesitate to contradict me if I said something she disagreed with.

All the same, I sometimes felt that I ultimately disappointed her in terms of my input, and this made me question my own knowledge and the usefulness of my research at times. At one stage, around the time of the failed newsletter discussed earlier, I felt that Jill's behaviour towards me became less friendly. However, as I became increasingly involved with the more practical and everyday work of the group she seemed to warm to me again, and our relationship perhaps became a bit more straightforward. In fact she showed great kindness and thoughtfulness towards me in many small ways, for example working to make sure that I was integrated and included with the rest of the group (as did Sandra). At the end of my fieldwork both she and Sandra publicly thanked me at meetings for my help, and Jill wrote to me personally as well as organising a present and card from the whole group. I was very touched by these gestures.

Indeed, as stated earlier, I found that throughout my fieldwork I was constantly surprised by people and incidents, and constantly having to reassess my emerging ideas and judgements. This is both the difficulty and richness of ethnography, which can feel unpredictable and uncertain, yet also opens up experience in all its complexity. I felt, in the end, that part of what ethnography had given me was an awareness of the difficulty of knowledge about the world, an awareness of what I didn't know. At least with interviews there is some expectation that questions can be asked and answers given at a certain moment in time. Such a sense of uncertainty and emergence around ethnography is also what makes 'leaving the field' difficult, as people and situations continuously evolve.

By the time participants' lives come to be represented in writing up, they have already moved on. This can create a strong sense of dislocation in producing narratives with the material.

On a more personal level I tried to withdraw gradually from my fieldwork with the groups, during the autumn and winter of 2004, rather than leaving abruptly. Nonetheless during a conversation with Sandra, after my fieldwork was officially over, she seemed to be suddenly struck by what I was doing back in London. She was speaking and I was making notes and she commented, laughing, 'I wonder what this is going to sound like when it's written down, I bet it's going to sound completely different'.

2.6 Analysis and writing up

As I hope has been clear from the preceding discussion, my fieldwork was a powerfully affecting experience. I felt that it was personally transformative, although I would have difficulty saying in precisely what ways. Nonetheless it is undoubtedly recorded within myself, as Judith Okely (1994: 21) writes, 'in memory, body and all the senses', as much as in my fieldwork notes or on tape recordings. These less tangible resources have been extremely important in analysing and writing up the material. Indeed I have found that I have recollected moments and incidents as highly significant, which I may have skipped over briefly in my diary or indeed missed out altogether.

Nonetheless it is with the formal and textual resources²² that I began working through my analysis and write-up of the fieldwork. I wrote a fieldwork diary sometimes by hand, and sometimes on the computer, after every visit or event with the two groups. This was intended to be primarily a detailed record of what had happened, without focusing too selectively, although in practice I tended to focus on incidents or things that people said which seemed significant, even if I didn't know why at the time. I also, of course, wrote about my own feelings. Whilst some methods advice manuals suggest separating out a personal diary and more detached observation, I think I would have found this very hard. I sometimes made notes whilst 'in the field' but generally relied on remembering and writing up afterwards, often whilst on the train back to London. Writing the diary could sometimes be draining in itself, when I felt embarrassed or ambivalent or just exhausted by something that had happened. It also reinstated a kind of distance between myself and the groups, and indeed as the fieldwork progressed I actually felt less motivated to write up the experiences, I think because I felt more involved and less of a distanced 'researcher'. Cloke et al (2002: 197) write about the emotions involved in writing fieldnotes, and the feelings of guilt they may involve as interactions become 'material' for a research project.

I generally taped my more formal interviews with policy officials, workers and members of other community groups, although occasionally I felt uncomfortable about this and just wrote detailed notes during the

²² On a more empirical level, as well as my own written records which I go on to discuss, I also collected large amounts of printed information during the fieldwork, such as policy documents, the groups' newsletters and flyers, newspaper clippings from the Sentinel and more. I also took some of my own photos.

interviews instead. Some of my meetings and encounters with policy officials and workers were more informal though, as already noted, for example a chat during another event. I also taped interviews and group discussions near the beginning and near the end of my fieldwork with both the Westfields and Riverlands groups. In writing up the empirical material I have indicated where quotes from research participants come from taped interviews. Elsewhere, I have relied on my fieldwork notes for records of conversations.

The final discussions I ran with participants I called 'feedback' sessions, and they took place after my main fieldwork period was over and when I was beginning to develop analysis. During these I presented some key questions that I was trying to answer in my research, to which I both gave some answers and asked for contributions from participants. Although I had felt very unsure about how this would work, especially given my difficulties using 'discursive' methods previously, it was actually a reasonably effective strategy, which did enable me to raise some of the more difficult issues that I was thinking about in relation to the groups²³. For example, I was able to ask them explicitly how they felt about issues of 'anti-social behaviour' (see discussion in subsequent chapters) associated with young people in the two neighbourhoods, a subject which was often mentioned in passing in highly ambivalent terms.

²³ Nonetheless, only a small number of participants chose to attend the feedback sessions (four in each case), including one woman in Westfields who stood by the door throughout and kept saying that she was about to leave. I think the low attendance was a mixture of people not being interested and feeling 'put off' by the idea of an explicit discussion about my research.

Prior to these sessions I had re-read all my fieldwork notes several times and had begun to note emerging themes and mark up particular incidents and issues. I also re-organised all the notes in order to separate out material relating to the two groups, to Stoke more generally, and to other local community groups. With the material on the two groups I decided early on how I would broadly present it according to chapter. I then made large sheets of paper on each chapter for each group with key fieldwork dates, incidents and themes relating to each of these chapters. I also made sheets of paper on every relevant individual and organisation that I encountered outside of the two groups. Where I had done an interview I listened to the tape several times and mapped out key themes and transcribed sections where they seemed particularly relevant. Where I had just met people more informally I made a list of dates and notes on those occasions.

I should also make clear here that the real names of individuals and places have not been used throughout the thesis. I raised the issue of anonymity with both groups at the beginning and end of my fieldwork period. When I revisited the question with the Riverlands group at the end they said that they didn't mind whether they were anonymous or not in the writing up. However, the Westfields group seemed more concerned about being named as individuals. Some of my interviewees also did not want to be named. So in the end, the only viable strategy was to make the neighbourhoods anonymous, although I also explained to both the groups and to individual interviewees that it would be possible for a reader who knew Stoke well to work out where the research was based.

I hope that this has given a sense of how I developed my analysis of the fieldwork material, from 'the interplay of data and perplexed perception' (Lofland 1976; quoted in Jones 1985: 57). However, on a less practical level, developing analysis clearly involves a kind of reconciliation between what might be understood as participants' ways of making sense of the world, and academic concepts. To some extent, this is a question of language and discourse (for example the term 'public space' was rarely used by research participants) but it is also more broadly about categories of meaning and experience. Such a reconciliation can perhaps never be satisfactory. If I have attempted it in writing up my fieldwork, it is essentially through a kind of tone and overall approach to writing about the experiences which I hope is an appropriate reflection of spaces as they might be understood by participants as well as by myself. At the feedback session at Riverlands I suggested to those present that their very everyday 'ordinary' activities, like having a cup of tea together, might be the most important aspects of their work. I remember that Jill laughed, but agreed, as did others.

Nonetheless, I have not at the time of writing committed myself to sending the groups my thesis, although I am planning to produce a 'report' for both groups. There are a number of reasons for this. Partly I wanted the freedom to be critical about the groups if this is what I feel is appropriate. Also, although I do want the groups to be able to engage with the issues I raise, and to respond to them, I felt unsure whether giving them the whole thesis to read was the most meaningful way of doing this. Again these

issues can perhaps never be ultimately settled. As I set out at the start of this chapter, ethnography involves negotiating positions and knowledges between researcher and researched, and it is perhaps in writing up that these negotiations become most pressing, and most difficult to resolve.

2.7 Conclusions

In this chapter I have chosen to write in a personal way about the difficulties, as well as the pleasures of fieldwork. This is partly because I feel that it is important to recognise and discuss the ways that ethnography often feels 'messy, uncoordinated, unproductive' (Parr 2001b: 183), especially given that there is increasing interest in such methods within geography (Lees 2003), yet little debate about how such issues might be worked through. However, more specifically, I also want to highlight how the unpredictable and emergent nature of ethnography has the potential to disrupt our understanding of the relationship between theoretical understanding and the 'real world'.

As I noted earlier, ethnographies have sometimes been used to demonstrate the 'reality' behind media-based or even academic representations of certain groups or places, or to provide accounts of people's 'agency' or capacity for 'resistance' in the face of structural accounts of the workings of power. However, if we have now moved beyond such binary understandings of the social world, then it follows that we particularly need to produce fine-grained, ethnographic accounts, which allow for new forms of understanding. Nigel Thrift argues (1995,

quoted in Cloke et al 2002: 188), that we should now do research projects where ‘ “theory” is not “applied” in a particular “context” but where the theoretical and empirical fold into one another in a glutinous mix’. Making this happen means that fieldwork practice becomes an essential theoretical component of a research project, rather than a means to an end of developing theory. For example, this suggests that theoretical categories might arise out of research practice. I hope that such an approach will be apparent as I begin to analyse the spaces of my fieldwork in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Three

The public and the state: Stoke-on-Trent

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter One, it is impossible to think about the kinds of public spaces I am interested in without considering government interventions, through policy discourses, initiatives and programmes as well as the actions of individual government actors. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the workings of national and local government constitute senses of 'the public' which in turn impact on the spaces of the neighbourhoods. More particularly, in this chapter, I want to show how the national policy debates I discussed around the nature of the public, and the different modes by which government might seek to reconstitute it, are worked through by local officials. However, before this I also want to explore how more locally specific senses of 'the public of Stoke-on-Trent' frame relationships between the groups and officials.

I will therefore begin by briefly discussing the methods and kind of empirical material on which the chapter is based, and setting out some thoughts on how local government in particular might be approached as a sphere of overlapping discourses, actions and interventions. I will then move on to focus on discourses around the role of the public of Stoke-on-

Trent in relation to regeneration and economic development in the city. In order to do this I will set out the main development schemes currently taking place in the city, and then go on to consider both interview material with officials and the discourses of the local newspaper, *The Sentinel*. Then I will discuss in broader terms how the modes and discourses of publicness associated with national government also shape how government and agency officials in the neighbourhoods see the 'public' that they are working with. Finally, I will discuss some ethnographic examples from initiatives within the neighbourhoods which sought to engage the public in local authority decision-making.

3.2 Researching local government

This chapter is based primarily on interview material with local government and other public sector workers, and ethnographic observation, although I also looked at some policy and strategy documents, and material from *The Sentinel* newspaper. As well as nine in-depth interviews, I met and talked more informally to a number of other officials, and observed them operating within the context of the two neighbourhoods. This ranged from quite focused engagement with some workers,²⁴ to more passing encounters and observations at collective meetings.

²⁴ For example I spent a morning shadowing three neighbourhood wardens in the East Town/Riverlands area, and then went on to meet them on a number of subsequent other occasions.

These officials were working in a range of situations and institutions, and in this sense it is clearly inappropriate to speak of 'the public sector' or even 'local government' as a coherent entity. Therefore, as well as council officers working in centralised offices, I interviewed and met a number of community development workers and one housing officer based long-term in certain neighbourhoods. I also met and interviewed community wardens who were funded through central government but worked directly to a local housing association, and a Sure Start worker, who was again paid ultimately by the health service but was accountable to the local voluntary sector bureau. Beyond working in substantively different areas, these workers had different allegiances and relationships to both central and local government, and different relationships to the public that they were working with. In what follows I will at times draw a distinction between officers working in a centralised capacity based at the main council offices, and those based in specific locations around Stoke.

Nonetheless, the officials were connected by relationships and contacts, as well as formal structures, practices and discursive fields. To varying extents they often attended the same meetings, read the same policy documents and were affected by the same decisions and dynamics locally. Also, crucially, apart from one set of community wardens (in Canalside, a neighbourhood I was considering working in) all these officials had a direct relationship with one or both of the two community groups I was working with, and it was on this basis that I selected

individual officials whom I was interested in interviewing or making contact with.

In relying heavily on interview material here, I am aware that in the previous two chapters I have argued that 'publics' and public spaces are constructed through material and embodied actions, as well as through language and discursive structures. However, it remains the case that the sphere of policy initiatives and programmes is strongly shaped by discourse, as discussed in Chapter One. This is partly in the nature of all government policy, which is always 'implicated in constructing and sustaining a "system of belief"... about the nature of social reality' (Hastings 1998:193). Local actors come into contact with policy discourses from central government through written policy documents, meetings, seminars, speeches, training workshops and so on. Indeed during my interviews local government workers often referred to particular policy documents or broader areas of discussion, for example an official working on community involvement spoke of, 'all the policy stuff that's out now, the real big debate about "active communities" and citizenship'.

Indeed more specifically, Janet Newman (2001) argues that the 'Third Way', the political project associated with the New Labour government, is in particular a 'discursive strategy' (46), in that it attempts to present its programme of reforms and 'modernisation' as a narrative which can negotiate between the legacies of the social democratic welfare state and neo-liberal Thatcherism, as discussed in Chapter One. As well as the

importance of narrative structures in framing policy programmes, particular terms and words also occupy a central place in current social policy, such as 'anti-social behaviour' or 'social inclusion'.²⁵ These terms work not only to re-frame social and political processes, but also to take policy into whole new spheres of action and concern, as should become apparent from my discussion below, particularly in relation to personal and intimate aspects of life. However, in all this it would be a mistake to see the New Labour or Third Way programme as coherent. As stressed in Chapter One, elements of its reforms are often competing or at least in tension, for example the simultaneous moves towards both 'empowering' service providers to work in more flexible and responsive ways, and towards regulating their work through targets and managerial practices (Newman 2001).

Dilemmas and uncertainty arising from such tensions between policy modes are experienced in a real way by local government officials, as I hope to demonstrate. Nonetheless, beyond conflicting modes of policy intervention are perhaps more fundamental issues of resistance to central government initiatives by local actors,²⁶ as well as a reworking of such initiatives through existing local government power structures and procedures (Barnes et al 2004). As Corbridge et al (2005: 152) write, the perspectives of local government officials should be understood in terms of 'their embeddedness in local society' and as therefore subject to

²⁵ Indeed Newman (2001) argues that the use of the term 'social' is particularly significant in that it actually involves moving away from a language of the public.

²⁶ Tony Blair (1999) famously talked of the 'scars on my back' from dragging a recalcitrant public sector through central government reforms.

'contrasting and often competing pressures'. One particular issue to draw attention to here is the relationship between local government officers and elected councillors, which is perhaps a constant one in local government, but played out in Stoke in specific ways,²⁷ as I will go on to indicate.

Central government initiatives therefore always have a more partial and experimental quality than their own narratives might admit. As I shall explore in relation to Stoke, within the discursive sphere of local government, alongside the narratives and terms of the New Labour project, are discourses associated with other political projects as well as with Stoke's particular historical, economic and political context. This sphere of discourses is produced and performed through locally produced plans and strategy documents, Best Value Reviews, as well as meetings, council sessions, informal discussions and anecdotes and so on. In such ways the spaces of local government interventions can be understood as 'constituted by the intersections of local, regional, national and transnational phenomena' (Gupta 1995, quoted in Corbridge et al 2005: 120).

To summarise, therefore, a nexus of often conflicting discourses, feelings and understandings positions 'the public' whom local government officials are engaged with in various ways. How this public is understood and the kinds of relationships which are framed have important implications for all

²⁷ Although I did meet and talk informally to local councillors, as well as observe them operating in meetings, I did not interview any elected councillors. I did attempt to do this early on in Riverlands and was not successful.

aspects of the interactions between local government and citizens, including service delivery in many settings, and programmes of 'public participation'. Having said that, within the spaces in which officials and local people actually meet, I would stress that other kinds of relationships and identifications are always possible, which are not necessarily pre-determined by any such existing discursive framings. As Corbridge et al (2005: 258) point out 'spaces of citizenship and participation' may be opened up, perhaps unintentionally, or in unforeseen ways, when officials and citizens meet. Nonetheless, certain contexts and spaces are perhaps more heavily pre-determined than others, and as I shall discuss in relation to the community facilitation service meetings, spaces can both open up and shut down possibilities for interaction and joint political action.

Before moving on to the substance of my discussion, it is important to note that whilst I am deliberately using the term 'public' to think about such relationships between citizens and government, as will become clear, policy officials tended to use this term alongside terms such as 'local people' and 'the community'. Although these words are related, they do have somewhat different connotations. As I discussed in Chapter One, 'community' has a particular place in national policy discourses, which suggests that the public might be understood in specific ways. However, again, for the purposes of my argument I want to hold on to the term 'public' here, as both a discursive term and an idea which connects the spaces of my research to a particular set of concerns. At the end of this chapter I will return briefly to the conceptual framework around public

space which I proposed in Chapter One, and discuss how this sphere of local government understandings and actions can be thought about within such a framework.

3.3 The public and regeneration in Stoke-on-Trent

3.3.1 Regeneration projects and initiatives

In this section I am going to set out some of the main 'regeneration' imperatives and programmes which affected Stoke-on-Trent at the time of my fieldwork. Issues around economic, social and cultural change in Stoke-on-Trent need to be understood within the context of a city which continues to feel the sharp impact of global economic restructuring, as the ceramics industry around which the city was traditionally dependent continues to decline and move its manufacturing base to the Far East.²⁸ The city, which is still colloquially known as 'the Potteries', essentially came into existence because of the ceramics industry, although it was also historically a base for associated activities of mineral extraction and mining. Such an industrial base arguably shaped not just the economic character of the city, but also its social, cultural and indeed spatial dynamics, as a 'city' made up of smaller-scale conurbations around which the ceramics industry was based (Edensor 2000, Jayne 2001), and

²⁸ By the end of 1999 the pottery industry only provided 17,000 jobs in Stoke-on-Trent (*The Sentinel* 2000, cited in Jayne 2000: 22) and there have been further losses since then, although the 1980s saw the most dramatic decline (ibid). Jayne describes the industry that remains as characterised by 'economic and physical decay, unemployment, low wages, factory closure and shortened working week' (ibid: 20).

historically dominated by 'traditional working-class identities and lifestyles' (Jayne 2001: 170).

With the loss of these industries, the need for the city to move forward or reinvent itself economically was clearly felt as extremely pressing by the local authority, especially in terms of attracting new forms of inward investment. The three more senior council officers I interviewed, who all had a city-wide remit, brought up these issues in particular. For example, the senior parks official was keen to place his responsibilities within this context:

The environment is a very significant factor in making people make the right choices from our point of view...to come and live in Stoke, to invest in Stoke, to work in Stoke, so it's seen as an important cog in the wheel of what this city council is all about.

This imperative also framed a particular view of social, spatial and cultural change in the city, in terms of creating what the elected mayor called 'a leisured culture' based around consumer spending and the service industries.²⁹ This ties in with the kinds of aspirations for 'urban renaissance' that I discussed in Chapter One, in terms of government visions for the remaking of urban public spaces, and can be seen as a desire to make the public of Stoke, and the city's public spaces, more

²⁹ Stoke-on-Trent is highly unusual in having an Elected Mayor and Council Manager who form a decision-making 'Executive' overseen by councillors. This system was established in 2002 to give new forms of strategic leadership to the city (see archive articles at www.bbc.co.uk/stoke). Because of his power, the mayor and councillors frequently clashed over local issues, and this was an important element of the dynamics of 'local politics', which I will touch on later in this chapter, and return to in Chapter Six.

consumer-orientated. For example, the mayor said that he was in negotiations with Starbucks coffee chain to open branches in Stoke: 'I want to create an economic environment in which Starbucks will change its mind and relocate... I want to persuade Starbucks to come here and to persuade people that in the past thought Starbucks was a pretty toffee-nosed sort of place'.

This quote suggests the ways in which such change might be resisted by the existing public of Stoke, indeed that they might not be a supportive force in bringing about economic development in the city. I will return to this in more detail below, but at this stage I want to highlight the kinds of economic strategies that were being discussed at the time of my fieldwork. In particular, the mayor was associated with projects to change the spaces of the city around forms of 'cultural' production, consumption and leisure. This included a clearer focus on investment in Hanley as the 'city centre' as opposed to the other six towns which make up Stoke; the promotion and ongoing development of parts of Hanley as a 'Cultural Quarter', including new facilities and investment in the street-scene; investment in public art across the city; and the designation of a 'University Quarter' around Staffordshire University (see Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2002, 2004).

The other significant redevelopment imperative, just getting underway during my fieldwork, was a programme to intervene in and bolster the city's housing market. Stoke is the key area for a 'Housing Market

Renewal Pathfinder' programme, which is a ten to fifteen year strategy involving demolishing some housing stock, as well as refurbishment, new build and other kinds of physical interventions (see www.renewnorthstaffs.gov.uk). The programme is targeted primarily at specific localities within the city, which did not include either of the neighbourhoods where I undertook research, although smaller amounts of funding from the programme did become available to the Westfields area towards the end of my fieldwork. Those localities which are the focus of the programme seem to be places where the housing stock is in particularly bad condition, but which also have potential to contribute to wider economic development processes, for example being near commercial centres. The programme was clearly likely to cause controversy in areas where residents would lose their homes, and so outreach and consultation were taking place in these areas during my fieldwork period.

Stoke-on-Trent also receives 'Neighbourhood Renewal' funding from central government, as part of the national strategy for 'narrowing the gap between deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country' (see www.neighbourhood.gov.uk). This ties the local authority in to establishing various new mechanisms for involving local people, the voluntary sector and other agencies in tackling issues around the most disadvantaged areas, usually neighbourhoods of local authority housing. Essentially this means various new forums and partnerships, and although the programme does bring new monies into the area the emphasis, at least in

theory, is on working in new ways, with active 'public' or 'community' participation as a key aspect. As a result of this and other policy pressures a 'community facilitation service' was in operation in Stoke-on-Trent at the time of my fieldwork. This involved establishing local forums based on wards across the city, at which concerns relating to that locality could be discussed, with council officers assigned to work in those areas. The process created tensions between existing elected councillors within neighbourhoods and such officers, and indeed I gained the impression that the service had partly been set up because of what were seen as the shortcomings of local councillors. I will return to discussing the service in some detail in the last section of this chapter.

Aside from these sets of initiatives there are a huge number of other specific strategies, regeneration projects and policies which affect Stoke. Perhaps particularly significantly, Stoke has been the target of a number of government programmes around healthcare, reflecting high levels of a range of health problems associated with deprivation (see www.healthycity.gov.uk). Prior to my fieldwork period there had been a 'Health Action Zone' around Stoke and during my fieldwork 'Sure Start' programmes were in operation across the city. Indeed both the neighbourhoods where I did research were in Sure Start areas. These involve a range of interventions targeted at under-five year-olds, from work with pregnant women to speech therapy, healthy eating and play initiatives for young children. Within Sure Start programmes there is a strong

emphasis on the involvement of local people, through volunteering and through representation on decision-making bodies.

Other significant regeneration initiatives and programmes around Stoke included a number of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) schemes, which were all officially drawing to a close by the time of my fieldwork, but in some cases had left ongoing programmes or projects. These were mostly targeted at particular geographical areas across the city, and involved a mix of physical, economic, cultural and social interventions. Again there was, at least in theory, an emphasis on public participation in the programmes. I will discuss the legacy of the SRB programme on East Town, a neighbouring estate to Riverlands, in Chapter Four.

Within these programmes there was therefore a mix of economic, and more social and welfare orientated approaches. However, as already noted, the senior council officials I interviewed were clear that the fundamental challenges for Stoke had to be tackled through economic strategies of attracting inward investment and creating new jobs, linked to developing a new 'image' for the city. In the next section I will discuss public involvement with these programmes, with particular reference to the relationship of the public to economic change.

3.3.2 The public and economic change

Despite the emphasis on participation in all of these regeneration schemes, the influence of local people on change was often framed in a

negative way by council officers, with the suggestion that they might be generally opposed to the kind of economic and social development strategies that it was felt that the city must adopt. As already noted, this was particularly evident in the interviews I undertook with three senior council officers working in what might be described as a 'strategic role' and was present to a lesser extent with officials working in a more geographically specific way.³⁰ One term which was often used to describe Stoke and which came up several times in these interviews was 'parochial'. The senior parks official said that 'Stoke is the most parochial place you could come across', and he also said that the current facilitation service, with its emphasis on neighbourhood-based issues, represented a 'parochial approach to community involvement'. By this he meant a geographically and politically narrow perspective, whereas a 'strategic' view of the city would place it within broader economic processes in space and time:

talking to the community isn't the be-all and end-all, we've got to take the wider view [...] somebody somewhere has to take a strategic view of the world.

For him, taking this 'strategic view' meant prioritising investment in parks and green spaces that had the potential for a wider economic impact, generating investment in the city centre. By contrast he saw 'local' green spaces like children's play areas as having little impact 'over and above providing a recreational facility' for local people.

³⁰ Although pressures around public participation clearly come from central government, during these interviews I also sensed that officials were sometimes responding to a perception of what my own position might be regarding the importance of local participation, because I had told them about my research.

A similar sense of a clash of perspectives was apparent when I interviewed the then elected mayor of Stoke-on-Trent. He told me:

Our problem is that educational levels are very low, people don't understand the underlying theory behind regeneration, it's just "why don't you just repave my street?" because that's what they see. The answer is that if we just repave your street we won't have a city in fifty years time and here's all the evidence and this is what is happening around the world and this is the world market.

The kind of 'strategic view', which both interviewees felt that local people lacked, was associated with ideas about the broad processes of economic, social and cultural change which the people of Stoke should be embracing. The above quote suggests the need to prioritise investment in certain locations in the city, which in practice tended to mean investment in Hanley rather than the other commercial centres or neighbourhoods of Stoke, although this is not made explicit here. The mayor spoke about the need to move away from 'class-based aspirations and lifestyles' by which he clearly meant working-class practices. In any case he suggested that the whole notion of class-based identities was changing: coming back to the discussion of Starbucks mentioned earlier, he also said that the idea that 'only certain people can go there or drink this or that, all that's changing, that's the way the world is going, thank goodness'.

To return to the idea of 'the public', the suggestion here is that the people of Stoke-on-Trent do not form the kind of public which the local state

wants to work with; in other words one which has the desire and resources to participate in a new economic climate, is broadly co-operative, and which is able to take a 'strategic view' in terms of what is in the 'public interest', rather than representing the particularity of localised concerns, like getting their street re-paved or a new children's play area. Such dynamics play out in particular ways within the context of Stoke.

Nonetheless this also ties in with the debates I explored in Chapter One, both in terms of the promotion of a consensual public through policy discourses, and more theoretically around the notion of a rational public sphere, where people set aside individual subject positions and emotions. Those involved in neighbourhood-based politics were sometimes talked about as unreasonably 'demanding' and adversarial. The community involvement official spoke of the need to 'stop people putting the placards up', and criticised community groups for spending too much time 'campaigning'. Similarly, the parks official, talking about community groups said, 'they're there because they want to moan and they've got time on their hands'.

There was a sense that officials did not want to enter into debate with the public over the direction of economic change in the city. At a public lecture at Staffordshire University (9 March 2004), a member of the audience questioned the elected mayor aggressively about the building of expensive new flats in the city centre. The mayor replied by saying that the need to prioritise investment in the centre was 'just basic economics', in a similar vein to what he said to me about 'the underlying theory behind

regeneration'. Yet in his interview with me, he also recognised that such theories may not be entirely straightforward, and that economic growth may not impact on most people's lives. He was talking about Manchester as a good example of regeneration:

The city centre works, but it just gets more problematic when you say well, have we really linked that to North Manchester? There are still a load of people who have been missed out.

The official working on community involvement made a similar comment in relation to new investment in housing in Stoke through the Housing Market Renewal Scheme:

...the danger is that the 'nice homes' will all go to people from the outside, and won't help existing communities, they'll just continue to be poor elsewhere.

Stoke-on-Trent clearly needs to bolster its economic base, and is effectively in direct competition with cities like Manchester that have arguably more effectively developed 'post-industrial' economies, although as the mayor's comment above suggests, this may not be entirely successful either. However, as should be clear from this discussion, officials expressed an ambivalence about opening up spaces in which the views, feelings, fears and hopes of the city's public could be expressed, despite the emphasis on public participation in regeneration schemes. Often processes of involvement seemed already strongly determined by the kinds of understandings of local people's views discussed here. For

example, the parks official told me that there was really little point doing 'consultation', telling me, 'I already know what people will say'.

This was perhaps partly because where spaces existed which did purport to express 'public opinion' or represent Stoke-on-Trent's particular 'public', they often seemed to reinforce negative understandings of such a public, within a 'them and us' mentality in which differences of perspective between local government and the public seemed impassable. One key site for framing such understandings is the local daily paper, *The Sentinel*. In the next section I am going to briefly consider its content and structure in terms of how it constructs the relationship between the public and the local authority. In focusing on the newspaper in this way it should be clear that I want to suggest that this is a potentially 'public space', generating collective opinions and forms of action.

3.3.3 Public opinion and *The Sentinel*

The Sentinel is a daily newspaper with a circulation of approximately 75,500.³¹ It is published in tabloid format, with each edition running to between 40 and 60 pages, including around 20 pages of local news, 12 pages of classified adverts, and the rest taken up with readers' letters, sports, entertainment, and one or two pages of national and international news.

³¹ See also the paper's website at www.thisisstaffordshire.co.uk

Throughout my experience of fieldwork I felt that *The Sentinel* affected what happened in face-to-face encounters between the local authority and local people, such as at public meetings, as I shall go on to discuss. Therefore my judgement is that it did play a particularly significant role in the dynamics of such encounters, and is important to understand in relation to the construction of the particular public of Stoke more broadly. Nonetheless, in dwelling on the paper I do not want to suggest that its tone and content is necessarily significantly different from local newspapers elsewhere. Indeed, it would of course be wrong to assume that such a newspaper is some kind of transparent window onto 'public opinion', although it may set out to represent this. However, such a representation does in itself both shape, and become shaped by, people's views, so it would also be misleading to consider it as a site of representation which is separate from the 'reality' of the relationships between the local authority and the public. Rather it plays a mediating role between local government and local people. This is a question not just of the textual content of the newspaper, but of the ways in which it is read, understood and discussed locally. It is this broader discursive field, therefore, that I am interested in thinking critically about, as a space which opens up or limits collective engagement and action.³²

The Sentinel was often referred to by both officials and local people in discussions around regeneration and change in the city, with an

³² In briefly discussing the significance of a newspaper within a local political culture, I am aware that I am touching on a complex set of issues around representation, audience and opinion formation, which I cannot fully explore here. For a more sympathetic reading of the role of *The Sentinel* in particular, see Temple 2004.

assumption that everyone present would have seen the latest edition. Indeed at times it had a very direct impact on proceedings, for example at the meeting about the community centre on Westfields, which I go on to discuss in Chapter Six, and at which a *Sentinel* reporter was present. On another occasion at a meeting about the Housing Market Renewal programme (in an area outside of my two case study areas), two members of the local residents' association spoke about how upset they were at having their views, expressed during an interview with *The Sentinel*, misrepresented in the finished article. They read out a letter they had written to the editor explaining their position. Essentially they had been portrayed as opposed to the programme when in fact they wanted to work closely with the government agency in charge.

In fact whilst *The Sentinel* often presented itself as representing local people as opposed to the local authorities, these representations were contested by local people themselves at times. Less surprisingly, council officers and others often criticised or contested the way council policy or actions were portrayed in *The Sentinel*. Again this sometimes had a very direct impact on what happened at meetings with local people. For example, at one community forum meeting in the Riverlands area a council officer gave a presentation on where local authority funding came from, in response to articles in *The Sentinel* about the way council tax money was being wasted.

Local authority spending is one of the key themes around which many of *The Sentinel* headlines and articles consistently return, suggesting both wastefulness and incompetence, within a broader questioning of whether the council had local people's best interests at heart. During my fieldwork period these arguments crystallised around a number of specific issues, including a large proposed increase in council tax, and a council report and enquiry into an alleged £15 million overspend by council officers on the development of the 'Cultural Quarter' in Hanley, mentioned earlier. This enquiry played into broader debates about Stoke's economic, cultural and social future, and the strategies being employed by the local authority.

The Sentinel (23/1/04a) pointed out that the overspend could have been used 'to provide a hand-out of £62 to each of the city's residents', a statistic which seems to feed in to the kind of particularistic or 'parochial' approach to urban development characterised by council officers. The paper (23/1/04b) argued that whilst Stoke's residents did want 'a vibrant, cleaner, more prosperous city', they saw this as the council's duty to fund, unlike the mayor who 'prefers the "trickle-down approach" to improving the city through attracting businesses'. These debates, both around council tax increases and the cost of the Cultural Quarter project, were often referred to by people in my fieldwork sites. They also played into broader criticisms of the elected mayor,³³ who was often seen as standing in for a certain approach to regeneration. As already noted, such antagonism

³³ Although in fact the financial irregularities around the Cultural Quarter project had taken place before the mayor came into post, and he was in no way implicated.

could also be fuelled by the perspectives of local councillors who tended to be opposed to the role of mayor on principle.

One place where a focus on local authority incompetence and financial mismanagement is consistently in evidence in *The Sentinel* is the readers' letters pages, a form which perhaps most clearly signals the idea of representing 'public opinion', rather than the editorial line of the paper.

The letters section occupies between 8 and 10 pages, so in sheer volume alone is a significant aspect of the newspaper. As well as responding to the content of the paper's articles, the letters tend to generate their own internal debates, whereby correspondents reply to each other and threads of discussion are developed over time. The focus of these letters is almost entirely on local issues and concerns, and indeed the parks official whom I interviewed mentioned the amount of complaints about parks in the letters pages of *The Sentinel* as a factor in putting the issue on the council's agenda.

Within the letters, exasperation with the failures of the local authority is a recurrent theme, often particularly in terms of wasting council taxpayers' money. This is set against complaints about petty crime and vandalism, graffiti and other visible signs of decline. The letters often suggest a generalised sense of threat about present social and economic conditions, as opposed to a more a secure past. The extracts from these letters below are typical:

'Gutted at state of our city' (29 January 2004)

Sir – I am sure that I write this letter on behalf of the majority of the people in Stoke-on-Trent when I say that I feel exasperated at the state we find ourselves in and overwhelming concern for the future.... more and more I feel that we are being taken for granted. This is particularly relevant in the issue of the proposed council tax rises. Time and time again council spending beggars belief. All around us we have boarded up shops, bulldozed factories, people young and old not feeling safe on our streets. I'm sure that there isn't one of us who hasn't been personally affected by crime, or knows someone who has... After reading *The Sentinel's* banner headline that a proposed rise of 15 percent is to be expected for council tax bills this year, it is just too hard to swallow... How much more are we expected to put up with?

'Readers' Opinions' (24 April 2002)

We have parks that have been vandalised, in particular in Tunstall and Cobridge, with closed facilities, no staff, litter and dog dirt.

There are filthy streets full of vandalised properties and facilities – especially in the Furlong Road area of Tunstall – and no traffic wardens. I remember this city when it was a beautiful place to live with clean streets, lovely parks and vandal-free facilities [....] Why are we in such a mess? The answer is really very simple. We have a Labour Council which does not appear to care about the city.³⁴

³⁴ This letter was written before local elections in 2002 which led to a situation of 'No overall control' by any party within the council, and the election of a large number of independent candidates.

We have a police force which seems disinterested. We have a hospital system that is out of date and too old. Above all, Stoke-on-Trent has now become a dumping ground for asylum seekers, drug addicts and the country's criminals. No, the Potteries is not a safe place to live any more. Ask any of the decent, law-abiding folk of this city'.

This second letter formed part of a campaign in *The Sentinel* called 'Proud of the Potteries' during which readers were invited to write in with their responses to a marketing survey which had branded Stoke-on-Trent 'the worst place in England', based on data on a range of issues including housing, employment, crime and education. *The Sentinel* then spear-headed a campaign to discuss and refute this finding, and many responses followed the lines of argument set out above. Within such letters there was a persistent focus on the failures of local government, and senses of anxiety and insecurity associated with this, and less emphasis on Stoke's economic decline as a major cause of the area's problems.

Of course there were many other opinions expressed during the campaign, some of which proposed support for the mayor's 'theory behind regeneration', in terms of a 'strategic' approach to economic growth rather than tackling immediate and visible signs of decline such as graffiti and vandalism. However, I do want to suggest that the tone of voices that I have quoted here is indicative of many other letters and articles in the

paper, and that *The Sentinel* acts as a discursive frame for the voices of 'local people' or 'the public' of Stoke. Indeed at times it was spoken about as standing in for local public opinion. For example, during the public lecture at Staffordshire University, the elected mayor spoke about the paper as reflecting the 'city's psyche', which he saw variously as 'a victim mentality', 'anti-intellectual' and lacking in aspirations. He also criticised the Proud of the Potteries campaign specifically for failing to focus constructively on how the city's problems (in other words economic problems) should be tackled.

As a framing or mediator of public opinion therefore, *The Sentinel* has a tendency to feed highly antagonistic relationships between local people and the local authority. The local authority's actions are generally seen as failing to respond to local people's needs, whilst local people are portrayed as relentlessly critical, presenting lists of complaints, and unwilling to participate in a broader debate about the future of the city. This ties in to the mayor's perception that local people 'just want their pavements mended'. Certainly there is generally little sense of the public's voice coalescing into any kind of positive political programme or action. Jayne (2003: 192) associates the paper with a 'fatalistic' outlook within Stoke-on-Trent, and in many ways it seems to close down rather than open up debates about the city.

In the last two sections I have tried to show how within the context of Stoke, quite specific discourses and understandings circulate around the

role of 'the public' in relation to change across the city as a whole. As local authority officers tried to re-imagine Stoke and its post-industrial economy, the public were often seen as recalcitrant, parochial and antagonistic to such a project. Such a perception was indeed heightened by spaces such as the local newspaper which purported to represent this public. The role of the public therefore tended to be framed as either entirely consensual or endlessly critical and conflictual, in ways which seemed to shut down possibilities for other kinds of collective action or interaction. Such tensions were often present in meetings and discussion between local government officials and local people

I will return to placing these tensions within a broader discussion of public space at the end of this chapter. In the next part I want to discuss other kinds of understandings of the public which also circulated among government officials, partly influenced by policy imperatives from central government, and partly influenced by officials' own experiences and remit in relation to local people. Here the concerns were less with the public of Stoke's particular 'psyche' as the mayor put it, and more with broader issues around the role of local people and their relationship to the local authority, although clearly these overlap. In order to explore these other understandings in the next section I am going to return to some of the modes of publicness which I discussed in Chapter One in relation to current policy imperatives and debates. In doing so, I want to consider how far these themes or modes are actually taken up by officials and workers 'on the ground'.

3.4 Policy and modes of publicness

3.4.1 The public as consumers and active citizens?

In Chapter One, I discussed three modes of national policy discourse and interventions, which I characterised as seeing the public as consumers, as active participants in shaping local decision-making and service delivery, and as potentially irresponsible and therefore needing to be shaped or controlled by government action. In fact these modes clearly overlap and this was evident when examining how far they were present in the perspectives and actions of the local government actors whom I interviewed. Indeed such discourses can be seen as reworked through the understandings of officials, and the particular contexts they were situated in.

For example, the community involvement official said at one stage during the interview that he believed that the participation of local people in decision-making 'delivers better outcomes and solutions', essentially suggesting a consumerist model whereby services can be made to 'fit' what local people want more effectively. In other words, that public participation enables services to reflect people's preferences. He said:

We always assume that the standard fit or delivery of services is appropriate for certain circumstances, so you know, an example you could give, theoretical really, meals on wheels, 'you'll have your lunch at 12 o'clock, and there'll be, you know, meat and potato pie

and that's it', and then someone says, 'well actually I don't fancy meat and potato pie, give me five pounds and I'll go down the café down the road', so why don't we give them five pounds to go down the café, if it equates to the same cost?

It is also interesting to note that here taking a consumer-orientated approach means moving away from delivery of services via the 'public sector' itself. At other points in the same interview the official talked about the need for society or 'the community' to also get involved in actually delivering public services, in a mode of involvement or participation which seems quite different from simply being a consumer expressing preferences. In this part of the interview the official referred explicitly to central government policy:

And I think, all the policy stuff that's out now, the real big debate about 'active communities' and citizenship, is really saying, well there's a sense of responsibility, you know, the community needs to take responsibility for certain actions, the community can make a massive contribution, which is why we desperately need lots more of these community organisations. Youth provision? Who's best placed to, to run the youth club on a Thursday night? It's not our youth service, you know the best practice ones tend to be church ones, you know the community can do it.

This suggests the ways in which the kind of groups that I worked with would be actively encouraged by local government officials, and indeed I

heard many positive comments about the groups from workers within the neighbourhoods. For example, a police officer described the Westfields group as a 'godsend'. Overall, what is being advocated here is a kind of 'partnership' approach to service delivery, in which an active and participatory public is expected to take on certain responsibilities, which in the past might have been delivered by central government. Here again there is assumed to be a certain level of consensus between what the public and the state want in relation to service provision. This same official saw this as, at least potentially, a shift from a situation whereby residents would continually be 'campaigning' or pressurising the council to take action over certain issues (as the kinds of discourses of *The Sentinel* might imply) to one where they wanted to take an active role in addressing an issue:

Now it's more like, how do we resolve this issue together? I mean the council can't do everything, for example speeding, that's society, that's certain individuals in a community. Sometimes peer pressure is the most effective solution, although when public services are failing or weak then of course that should be addressed.

Although the official presented this narrative as an account of what was already happening, others questioned the extent to which the public was ready or willing to take on such a role. For example, a housing officer in the Westfields area commented, 'People around here are too dependent on the council, they still think the council's the patriarch, you know, "Big Brother'll catch you"'.

This clearly links back to the idea discussed in earlier parts of this chapter, of a recalcitrant public who won't form themselves into the kind of body which the local authority wants to work with. Indeed beyond the narratives around Stoke's particular public, officials also questioned the whole idea of 'public' or 'community' participation at a more general level. For example, when I asked the community involvement official whether local people could 'influence' decisions', he said, 'Yes, but not always for the better good really'.³⁵ He went on to talk about a new road scheme which had been blocked by a small group of 'articulate people'. However, he also said that 'the majority of people locally were supportive of what was going on'. This therefore suggests a concern that those who come forward to get involved in local authority issues are not necessarily 'representative' of a broader public. Such a concern was shared by others, for example the parks official who said, 'Community groups are invariably older and white, they don't represent the community do they?'.

A similar point was made by a community development worker based near the Westfields area. She was talking about the people who go to the council's area forums, whom she said were usually from residents' associations:

... it's the usual suspects, it's the usual people, they exclude other people in the community, some of them actually claim to represent

³⁵ Although this seems to directly contradict the quote above about participation producing 'better outcomes', I think that importantly I had framed my question here in terms of local people having a direct impact on decisions, rather than participating in a process of change in a consensual way.

the whole of the community and they don't, they can't possibly can they? But how they actually communicate what they're doing with the community, how they actually get information back is ...to me it's questionable.

Indeed the phrase 'the usual suspects' is quite a common one among officials with reference to community involvement, and was often contrasted with those seen as 'hard to reach' (Barnes et al 2004: 273). Furthermore, although this worker and others characterised residents and community groups as failing to represent 'the community', she also admitted that there wasn't really a 'community' locally:

There are little pockets but ...you know the traditional idea of a community, was that, everybody knows everybody, you leave your back door open, everybody helps everybody, and you'll want what's best for each other and things like that. Gone. You know that just doesn't exist anymore.

Such an image of 'community', which is arguably that espoused by policy discourses (Raco and Imrie 2003b), therefore seems to fall down when thought about empirically in relation to a specific locality. Indeed all this suggests that the constitution of a public willing to participate in decision-making, and which meets the expectations of policy imperatives, is not a straightforward matter. This brings in the idea that individuals need to be actively worked on, 'constructed', in terms of new understandings of responsibilities, and clearly links in to the discussion of 'the politics of behaviour' and of authoritarian measures to shape the public that I

discussed in Chapter One. These issues were particularly present in the interviews that I undertook with locally-based council workers, partly because of the nature of the services they are involved in, and the kinds of day-to-day relationships with local people that they set up. This gave them a somewhat different perspective on the idea of a public, and it is this material which I will explore in the following section.

3.4.2 Subjects of autonomy and responsibility?

Indeed those council officials who worked on a daily basis with individuals in my case study areas tended not to talk of 'community involvement' or 'public participation' as a particular activity or process, but rather in terms of ongoing relationships and interactions with local people. They spoke more about individual attitudes or behaviours, often linked to people's domestic or private lives, and to an overall sense of their ability to manage their lives in a responsible fashion, of which formal 'community participation' might be one part. Nonetheless this ties in with the points raised in the previous section around local people taking more responsibility for bringing about change in their areas. Officials often contrasted the community groups I worked with favourably in relation to the behaviour and situations of 'local people' more generally.

Therefore the issues here were framed by workers as less about people choosing to have a particular relationship with the local authorities, whether of being demanding and adversarial, or consensual and collaborative, but more about dealing with deficiencies and difficulties in

their own lives. Local people were therefore seen as needing individual support or interventions. The housing area officer in Westfields spoke about 'problem families' and the many 'young people who lack resources to run their own lives, who lack networks of support'. A community development officer in the same area spoke in very similar terms about a situation where, 'in terms of families, all the support systems have gone, for example in this area we have a very high proportion of lone parents'. Her work centres on skills and training and she spoke about the difficulties of getting people back into the employment market:

... there isn't the confidence, people don't seem to feel able to say, well right, I really need to do something about this, I need to improve my work opportunities, that sort of confidence is just not there.

As is evident from these quotes, such personal resources were often linked to family environments as well as a broader local context. A community development worker attached to the secondary school in Riverlands spoke of local people's 'low aspirations', and, 'the kind of culture of putting people down in terms of success, not really looking for success'. The term 'low aspirations' was also very widely used among other 'frontline' workers, along with 'low horizons' and 'lack of ambitions'. The worker from the school also talked of the difficulties of getting people to go outside their 'comfort zones'.

- As already noted such an analysis clearly ties in with 'Third Way' policy imperatives to take government action into domestic lives, to intervene at

the level of subjectivity and personhood (Rose 2001) and to shape attitudes and behaviour in particular ways, especially around becoming economically active. As such it relates to the discussion in Chapter One around the New Labour project to form new kinds of public. The workers I interviewed did not generally analyse the situations that local people were in through an analysis of broader social change, but rather in terms of more 'micro' family and neighbourhood dynamics, as in Giddens' (1994) project of 'life politics', which focuses on areas of personal life rather than broader ideological change.

However, the 'frontline' workers I interviewed did not always wholeheartedly endorse policy discourses, and generally had a somewhat ambivalent view of particularly policy initiatives and frameworks. As Corbridge et al (2005: 259) point out, academic accounts sometimes position professional workers as naïve or 'guileless' when it comes to the policy frameworks in which they operate, with only local people as able to be critical or 'see through' them. Yet this simplifies the dynamics at play in government interventions. For example, a number of the workers I interviewed had been in post for many years, and had an in-depth knowledge of the areas. This could lead them to interpret issues through different perspectives, drawing on their own experiences or other discourses. There was also a considerable amount of criticism of the structures and guidelines under which they worked. For example, a community development worker from East Town, who had been there for twenty years told me that 'the level of poverty hasn't changed since I've

been here', using a term 'poverty', which is not frequently used in current discourses around social exclusion and neighbourhood renewal. She also went on to say that recent initiatives, crucially the SRB scheme, but also the community facilitation service had had no positive impact.

Similarly, the community development worker from Westfields (who in fact was not employed directly by the local authority but through a community-based organisation) was very negative about other service provision in the area, in particular education. She spoke about what she saw as the 'destruction of public services' under Thatcher, and about the 'formality' and 'tick box' culture of current approaches to education, 'If you can't fit into one of their systems like that, you've had it [...] there isn't a recognition of how important informal learning is'.

Criticisms of the structures and guidelines within which they worked were also voiced by the 'neighbourhood wardens', based around Riverlands and East Town. These wardens are supposed to act as 'the eyes and ears of the community', generally being a reassuring presence and looking out for problems, in a sense replacing some of the 'support networks' or 'senses of community' which both workers and local people felt had been lost.

Such a role is clearly inspired by 'Third Way' and communitarian approaches to tackling small-scale neighbourhood concerns and 'problem behaviour'. However, the wardens were emphatic that this approach did not resolve the main issues around young people and fear on the streets in the area. Because of their roles, their interaction with people remained

fairly formal and they were unable to take a more positive approach to young people. Rather they were continually 'moving on' groups of young people in response to complaints from other residents. The wardens said that they wanted to get away from such negative approaches. As one of them said to me, 'what used to be called having fun is now called "anti-social behaviour"'.³⁶

In fact, in another area where I interviewed wardens they had interpreted the role slightly differently, and saw themselves as 'community animators', organising activities for young people and 'welcome parties' for asylum seekers in the area. Similarly, the housing officer in Westfields spoke about her desire to work more positively with the young people who had been served with 'anti-social behaviour orders' and 'acceptable behaviour contracts' in the area, but said that she felt constrained by her role and resources.

Nonetheless, more in line with recent policy approaches, a consistent theme in my interviews with these workers was that broad social change could be brought about by enabling people to change their lives on an individual level, although this is probably not surprising given that these workers were trying to change people's lives without huge resources or the ability to tackle inequality more strategically. The worker at the secondary school was involved with running what she called 'social and

³⁶ I shall discuss perceptions of young people in the neighbourhoods, and their association with the term 'anti-social behaviour' in following chapters.

emotional learning' with students as well as confidence-building workshops for adults looking to get into the job market. She said:

...people need to learn to question what's been thrown at them, to understand their situation and try to break the cycle, for example why don't their parents get out of bed?

A kind of therapeutic approach was also expressed by a community arts worker, who spent her time working on publicly funded regeneration schemes and projects, although she was not directly employed in the public sector:

We see our work as life-changing, as deeply transformative on a personal level. We've seen people's lives being turned around, opening up to new experiences and realising that change is possible.

Interestingly, she also interpreted the problems in local areas through a therapeutic framework, talking of communities as 'traumatised, damaged and scarred' by the collapse of the local economy and a lack of support following the 'dismantling' of the public sector in the 1980s. This is a somewhat different analysis of local people's problems than a 'lack of confidence' or 'lack of aspirations'.

In similar ways, the Sure Start programme in the Westfields area seemed to work through a mixture of government-led approaches and other practices and understandings. The programme had specific targets it was aiming to meet, but the midwife I interviewed, who worked with pregnant women in difficult circumstances, challenged the thinking behind some of

the targets on the programme. As she pointed out, even if it was possible to measure breast-feeding rates before and after the programme, how could they show that any increase was due to Sure Start? She felt that the most important thing she could provide was personal and emotional support for the women, through providing one-to-one complementary therapies, during which the women got half an hour, 'just for themselves'. She was very clear that this was an improvement on a purely 'clinical' approach to midwifery. This and other aspects of the programme again took health services into personal and intimate aspects of people's lives, including initiatives around promoting breast feeding, encouraging bonding and attachment with babies, and promoting play through play workers sent to people's homes.

The midwife felt that this way of working was ultimately more empowering for local people than traditional models of healthcare:

The approach has meant that we've been welcomed over time, we're on their patch, on their terms. Going into people's homes you are there with their permission, so it has got to be socially and culturally acceptable to people. In NHS buildings, people lose control, they do lose control don't they, they're there at our professional mercy for want of a better word, and there's a big difference there.

Indeed when I asked her midwife whether she felt that the programme might be seen as intrusive by people, that it was trying to 'change people's

lives too much', she told me that ultimately their successes were so partial, that they could never really control or colonise people's lives.

Of course, it isn't necessarily surprising that a professional employed on the programme would not be critical in such terms.³⁷ Nonetheless, as I hope this section has demonstrated, the senses of 'the public' within the neighbourhoods as understood by local government workers were shifting and complex, affected both by a changing policy context and other understandings and dynamics. For example, as already noted, some of the officials based in specific locations had strong senses of local allegiances, and in fact the Sure Start midwife had worked in Westfields during the 1970s. Therefore a divide between 'local people' or 'citizens' and 'officials' is not an absolute one. Indeed as Barnes et al (2004: p276) note in relation to their interviews with local government officers working on 'public participation':

Some of the officials engaged in these initiatives shared values and objectives with citizen participants, and some experienced difficulty in negotiating their own identities as both officials and citizens in such contexts.

Whilst highlighting the difficulties and complexities of these processes, Barnes et al (ibid) also suggest that such initiatives around public participation may lead to the constitution of 'new collectivities', which

³⁷ Indeed I did hear critical views about Sure Start in Westfields from others locally, both from other workers and local people as clients. I heard a number of times that it was too rigid and focused on 'tick-boxes', and that community groups felt in various ways that they had been co-opted into a process to suit the Sure Start agenda.

potentially include not only participants but also some officials. Policy shifts, combined with the other kinds of understandings present in localities, can therefore open up new kinds of spaces, which may present possibilities for forms of 'empowerment and citizenship' (Corbridge et al 2005). National policy frameworks therefore act as a kind of starting point for a more diverse set of dynamics, including the individual opinions, experiences and relationships of officials.

Nonetheless, as this chapter has also thus far shown, local people or 'the public' of Stoke-on-Trent remain discursively constructed in many potent and often negative ways. In the final section of this chapter I am going to consider more closely some spaces in which such dynamics come into play, in formal meetings between local authority officials and local people. In this I am drawing on ethnographic material from the two neighbourhoods where I focused my research, Westfields and Riverlands, and in particular with the community groups based in each of these localities.

3.5 Spaces of 'public participation'

3.5.1 Meetings

Clearly local people in the neighbourhoods had multiple encounters with local government and other service providers, which I will discuss at various points throughout the thesis. In Chapter Four I will discuss encounters and interactions that I felt were particularly significant in

shaping senses of the two neighbourhoods in which the community groups operated. In Chapters Five and Six I will discuss encounters which affected the community groups most directly. However, in this section I am interested in spaces which were formally linked in to a national government agenda around public or community 'participation', and which therefore set out to provide an interface between community groups and the local authorities in a broad sense, as spaces for negotiation over a wide range of issues. This means that they are spaces in which overall questions of the constitution of the public through national government policy and interventions seem especially relevant.

In terms of 'official spaces' into which community groups were invited, the most obvious of these took the form of 'meetings' at which some input or representation from 'local people' was required. The two groups seemed to attend a huge number of meetings, often in the evenings, and some weeks during my fieldwork they went to meetings every night of the week. Such meetings were a mixture of one-off meetings around a particular issue, for example a meeting for local people to give feedback on the local community wardens service, and ongoing forums or partnerships on which the groups sat, for example a Health Action Zone forum.

I would estimate that the two groups I worked with are quite unusual in that they are committed to attending such events on an ongoing basis. Even so, only two or three members of each group ever seemed to be prepared to actually go along, and they tended to complain about them

quite a lot. Other group members told me that meetings weren't 'their thing', 'too much talking for me', generally giving the impression that they didn't feel comfortable in such settings. Therefore it is important to bear in mind in what follows that those who attended the meetings were exceptional rather than representative of local people in any straightforward sense. This ties in with the idea discussed earlier in the chapter that those who go to meetings are 'the usual suspects', although such a phrase suggests that this is somehow the fault of the individuals concerned.

As I noted in Chapter One, Cochrane (2003: 230) argues that in analysing forums of 'public participation' under New Labour, the important questions to consider are not around 'empowerment and incorporation' but rather around 'the manufacture of different forms of political and civic legitimacy'. One area where such issues seemed particularly pertinent, and which was significant for the two community groups, was the so-called 'community facilitation service', mentioned at the start of this chapter. The service had been developed in response to the Neighbourhood Renewal programme of funding and its linked structures. As explained in a leaflet put together by Voluntary Action Stoke, it was set up with the aim of 'driving service delivery down to local level', and essentially comprised of a new set of local forums and partnerships, on the basis of areas comprising of two wards each. Each area employed a 'community facilitator' and had a 'community champion', a senior departmental manager who was 'of sufficient status to make sure that the views of the local forums are heard'.

The service had only been running about six months when I started my fieldwork in the area, so it was still in its early stages.

As will already be apparent, the service was somewhat complex in its conception, but the important point for the community groups was that they were invited to attend two monthly meetings: a local community network meeting, which was supposed to bring together and 'empower' local community groups, and a local community forum meeting which was a broader meeting on local issues attended by councillors and locally based officers and other workers as well. Also, the groups were in touch on an ongoing basis with their community facilitator and community champion, who were seen as possible first points of contact to raise concerns over local issues.

To return to Cochrane's point, above, the service potentially brought local people into direct contact with local authority officers in ways which threatened to undermine the role played by elected council members. The community involvement official I interviewed told me that councillors didn't like the model of 'participatory democracy' which the service provided. Conflict between councillors and officers working for the service was mentioned to me on a number of occasions by both officials and local people. One community facilitator told me that councillors actively tried to obstruct their work in certain areas. Indeed some months after finishing my fieldwork I heard that this conflict came to a head and councillors were able to vote for the service to be effectively disbanded. Mick at Riverlands

said to me that the councillors 'wanted everything to go through them, they saw the service as usurping their power'. Such a power struggle highlights the complexity of government initiatives around public participation, which may find themselves in conflict with the broader structures of local 'political society' (Corbridge et al 2005: 168). I shall return to discussing the role of councillors within this field of 'local politics' in Chapter Six, in relation to the two community groups.

Nevertheless, at the time of my fieldwork, the facilitation service was a significant means by which local people encountered government officials, and whilst I didn't particularly set out to research the facilitation service in relation to the community groups, it was often discussed by them. I met the local community facilitators on a number of occasions, and I also got to know a group of community development trainees who were working alongside the facilitators in each area, and spoke to them about the service in some detail. I did request more formal interviews with the facilitators themselves but they did not agree to this and indeed when I did attend some of the meetings I was not made to feel very welcome. I felt that the officers were defensive about the service, perhaps especially because it was new, and I was aware of changes made to its structure and operation whilst I was doing the fieldwork. So, whilst the material I have on the service in each of the localities is somewhat limited, I feel it is worth dwelling on here as it frames significant encounters between the groups and the local state.

3.5.2 Experiences of the facilitation service

Sandra at Riverlands and her husband Mick were particularly committed meeting-goers. I felt that they saw the facilitation service meetings as primarily a chance to get information about projects and funding locally, and perhaps also to meet other local groups. Mick once said to me, 'we just go to these meetings to find out what's going on, otherwise no-one ever tells us anything'. They understood that in order to position their group locally they needed to know what else was happening, what opportunities and problems might present themselves. Indeed they were known locally as very well informed on such issues, and a worker from another community group told me that she only found out about plans for a new health centre on East Town through Sandra, which was ironic given that Sandra didn't even live on East Town.

The community forum and the community network were officially set up as groups which took collective decisions and could initiate action, for example the community forums were supposed to deliver and monitor an area plan. However, as far as I could tell, the main function of the meetings was for council officers and other professionals to inform local people about services or projects locally, and perhaps ask for some feedback. This in itself was seen as useful, although when it came to actually influencing what the council did or spent money on in any significant way, Mick and Sandra were not under any illusions about whether this might happen in such a forum. Mick said to me, 'this whole "participation", in some ways it's only "participation" as far as they want it

to go'. As Edwards notes (2003: 199) whilst many such 'partnerships' or forums in regeneration make ambitious claims about democracy or inclusion, what happens at them is often very different. In this way there are clearly significant gaps between the ways in which participatory processes are spoken about in policy terms, and how they play out in practice. Nonetheless, as I have already indicated, they did at least offer the potential for new kinds of identification or interaction which might, over time, contribute to new senses of the public.

A sense of confusion about the purpose of the meeting was apparent to me when I attended a community forum meeting with Sandra and Mick. The meeting was held in a school building and there were about 30 attendees, a mixture of people from community groups, councillors and officers. There was a table at the front at which the local councillors, the community facilitators and the guest speakers sat, with everyone else forming an audience. The evening consisted of a series of long Powerpoint presentations by council officers and other workers, on topics including a detailed account of how the local authority is funded, a description of the structure and projects of the local Sure Start programme and a presentation about urban design problems and possible solutions for East Town. Although there was time given for questions and comments, it was quite unclear what the audience were supposed to do with the information given to them, quite apart from its complexity. As I noted at other meetings, officials often found it hard to hit the right note

when talking to local people and were sometimes patronising and simplistic, or alternatively too convoluted and unclear.

As the meeting wore on, I noticed that the local residents present became quieter. Indeed I had expected more opposition or criticism from the floor in response to some of the issues raised, for example the urban design presentation seemed to be proposing a whole series of new roads through the estate, but this was not picked up on. When I spoke to Sandra afterwards she told me she felt that there was too much to take in, some of it was going over her head. I noticed that both she and Mick seemed less sure of themselves in this setting, far less forthright and confident.

During the meeting there were young people hanging around outside the hall, banging on the windows and making faces. For me this reinforced a sense that the discussion taking place inside was somehow failing to get to grips with the everyday realities of life in the area, and was not inclusive of those seen as different locally, in particular young people. When I interviewed a professional community development worker from East Town she was highly critical of the service, because, as she said, it was run by council officers who were not trained in community work, but rather had been seconded from other departments, presumably to cut down on costs. Certainly there are other ways to 'empower' local people, 'setting up another forum doesn't help', she said.

This is not to say that the meeting was an entirely negative experience. Although, as I have suggested, the meeting was not set up in a way which gave local people a real voice, those that did come were warmly welcomed by the officials running it. Of course for the officers, anyone attending such a meeting was helping them to fulfil their goals of developing 'public participation' and furthermore those that came seemed, on this occasion at least, to be prepared to listen quietly and respond politely to the information they were given. In that sense they conformed to a certain model of 'responsible citizenship' or membership of the public that the service seemed to support, despite the fact that it was only involving a small minority of residents, often those who, like Sandra and Mick, were already involved in particular neighbourhood-based projects.

Having said all this, perhaps the important aspects of the meeting were not the formal presentations and discussions, but interactions which took place on the edges of all this. People arrived early for tea and biscuits and there was a something of a sense of occasion, with people catching up on news. Sandra and others were quite smartly dressed, and I felt that there might be some enjoyment in dashing around to all these meetings. These observations tie in with Iris Marion Young's (2000) points around the importance of greetings and informal modes of interaction in considering political communication.

Furthermore, such meetings did provide a way for Sandra, and others like her, to make contacts with individual officials, who might be able to

support them in other situations. In this sense they did pave the way for more explicit negotiations over resources and power, which were perhaps never going to take place in such settings. In particular, Riverland's good relationship with their community facilitator helped them to progress a number of projects and to access funding. She was felt to be very much on their side, 'community-orientated', and was willing to stick her neck out on the group's behalf in negotiations within the council. She clearly felt personally attached to the Riverlands group, 'they're an inspiration to us all', she said to me, and also attended their events in her own time, with her family in tow. Unlike other officials she was also a very clear communicator.³⁸

Having an ally like this in the local authority was undoubtedly advantageous for the Riverlands group, although she was moved out of her position after a year and replaced by a woman who seemed less popular. In any case, this and other alliances the group were able to form certainly did not guarantee influence over council decisions, and they still faced uphill struggles when they wanted to access more substantial money and resources, as I shall go on to explore.

Therefore the facilitation service did present some limited possibilities for influence over decision-making, especially through forming individual

³⁸ Indeed one of the trainee community development workers I met also became close to the Riverlands group in a way that far exceeded their initial relationship. She brought her own children along to their summer play scheme and continued to stay in touch with them when she got a job elsewhere. She told me that she felt that they were more 'her community' than where she actually lived.

alliances with council officers, and opening up lines of communication and interaction which might be useful in the future. Nonetheless, the spaces of the meetings of themselves could not be seen as empowering or enabling the groups in any direct sense. If anything the meetings seemed to reconfirm fundamental differences of approach to collective interaction and modes of decision-making. On one occasion I was at the community house and a worker in a youth project came by to discuss some arrangements. I said to them, 'I'll leave you if you're having a meeting'. Sandra laughed and said, 'No, we're just having a chat, we don't have meetings here'.

This sense of the limitations of the spaces opened up through the facilitation service was perhaps even more pressing for the Westfields group. The Westfields community facilitator who was in post when I started the fieldwork did seem particularly ineffectual from the group's point of view. They were particularly concerned about the redevelopment of the shopping centre, which I will discuss in subsequent chapters. The facilitator certainly did not present herself as being 'on their side' but instead fed them rather limited information from the council's perspective. As Jill complained, she often responded to questions by saying that she wasn't allowed to say, and never seemed prepared to 'fight their corner'. Jill kept up the pressure on the facilitator by inviting her to their open meetings to give updates about the shopping arcade, although several times she did not attend. On one occasion when she was present she seemed nervous and explained in a rather unclear way that the project

was now being treated as a 'phased' project for which they were looking to put together a 'cocktail of funding'. It was obvious to me and to everyone else present that this meant that nothing would happen in the short term. On this and other occasions I felt that officials were nervous of local people as potentially adversarial, rather than forming a consensual 'public' who saw things from their perspective, and therefore were not willing to enter into honest negotiations with them. This ties in with the kind of discursive constructions of the relationship between the local authority and the public discussed in earlier parts of this chapter.

However, the facilitation service did at least provide a new context within which such relationships were staged, and over time, even the dynamics of the more formal meetings could shift. When I sat in on a community network and community forum meeting in the Westfields area towards the end of my fieldwork, there was more of a sense of officials being publicly called to account than there had been at the Riverlands meeting.

By this time, as at Riverlands, the original community facilitator had been replaced and I felt that a certain amount of reflection had gone on within the council around how the service operated. Held in a hall used for evening classes, the community network meeting took place immediately before the forum meeting, which at least meant that people didn't have to come to two meetings and there was some attempt at differentiation between the two. For the network meeting chairs were arranged in a circle

and the facilitator told me that it was intended to be 'as informal as possible'.

Indeed, whilst the meetings were still chaired by officials there was some lively discussion among local people in both the network meeting and the community forum meeting which followed after it. When an officer stood up during the forum meeting to talk about the latest plans to tackle the shopping centre on Westfields he was asked some difficult questions by both one of the local councillors, and by Jill herself. She said that she really welcomed his involvement (he was new in taking on responsibility for the project, one of a long line of officers who had done so) but that she would be 'keeping an eye on him' and 'not letting him off the hook'.

However, she told me afterwards that she was not at all happy with the plans they were now working to, which were essentially 'superficial' as Jill put it. The plans proposed further demolition and some improvements to existing shops. The councillor had shown her the latest report about the situation even though the officer had told her it was confidential.

Nonetheless, the community network meeting was rather dominated by a discussion about electing community representatives for the forum. As already noted, the original purpose of the forum had been to create a decision-making body, and from the literature it seems that the intention had always been that elected representatives would speak for 'the community' at the community forum. However, for whatever reason this had not taken place over the past eighteen months, and now the facilitator

faced some difficulties in getting it organised. She had sent out nomination forms and ballot papers to people on the network before the meeting, along with an array of other papers relating to the meeting. There was confusion among the attendees, understandably for people who weren't necessarily used to dealing with lots of official papers, and only a few forms were returned. It was decided to postpone the process until a future meeting. The introduction of the representatives system meant that those local people who weren't reps wouldn't be allowed to speak at meetings. This was a cause for concern among those present given that most attendees seemed focused on representing their own group or estate rather than a sense of locality based on the facilitation service boundaries.

Again this raised issues around the new forms of political legitimacy, or indeed publicness, which the service was trying to produce, and how far they connected with the nature of collective interaction as it was understood locally. One way to consider the spaces of the facilitation service is to return more explicitly to the issues of public space as discussed in Chapter One, and indeed I will attempt to do this in drawing some conclusions from this chapter.

3.6 Conclusions

Ruth Lupton (2003: 127) writes that formal attempts to engage local people with change tend to 'embody the culture of local authorities' with professionals 'unsure how to value local knowledge and scared of conflict'. I hope that this chapter as a whole has given a sense of the difficulties and complexities in the imperative for local authorities to open up spaces of 'participation' for local people, in which new senses of the public might be formed. The uncertainty and fear that Lupton refers to is not simply a question of individual professional attitudes, but rather a whole context which constructs ambivalence about the extent to which local people can actually contribute to economic, social and cultural change.

In this chapter I have tried to show how this is the case in quite specific ways for Stoke-on-Trent, through a consideration of how officials talk about the 'public' of Stoke, and how such an entity is represented in the local newspaper, *The Sentinel*. The view that emerged from this consideration is of a public which seems a long way from a consensual, co-operative entity that might work in 'partnership' with the local authority to bring about change within the city. This public is seen as lacking understanding of the issues faced by Stoke. When I was talking to Sandra at Riverlands on one occasion about working with the local authority she said to me that for the group, 'it's not just "we want some more litter bins or new street signs", it's everything, it's the youth, the senior citizens, all the

facilities'. Her reference to 'litter bins and street signs' seems to point to the understanding of local people's concerns that she saw as being held by officials.

At the same time as this local context, officials were also subject to specific policy pressures from national government to both shape and work with the public in particular ways. These pressures suggested the production of an active and responsible 'community' or public who could participate in local authority decision-making, yet local workers questioned the possibility of the production of such versions of citizenship. Given all this it is perhaps not surprising that the meetings of the 'facilitation service' seemed to represent a partial attempt to engage local people within limited parameters. To return to Ruth Lupton's point about 'the culture of local authorities', these meetings remained strongly shaped by formal discursive conventions, which did not generally make local people 'feel comfortable', a key quality of the groups' spaces, as I will go on to explore. In this sense they constituted conventional 'public' occasions, which did not necessarily connect to people's private lives and concerns. Indeed in Chapter Six I will discuss in more detail the particular difficulties the groups faced when trying to take their projects into the formal spaces of 'local politics'. Nor were the spaces inclusive in terms of connecting with different groups, and younger people in particular seemed to have been excluded. These points show how the limitations of these spaces can be thought about in terms of their forms of spatiality, the way they set up

relationships between the public and the private, and the extent to which they attempted to negotiate 'difference'.

Corbridge et al (2005: 150), in relation to 'participatory projects' in India, question whether there are actually incentives in place to change officials' views of the ability of the poor to participate in decision-making. During my fieldwork I did come across officers who had the personal commitment, skills and understanding to want to work with local people, and to act as advocates on their behalf, drawing on their own experiences and practices as well as policy frameworks. Whilst the possibilities arising from any particular meeting may necessarily be limited, the formation of relationships between local people and individual officers over time could open up processes of decision-making. However, constant changes in personnel and structures seemed to be features of the local government initiatives I was aware of.

Nonetheless, initiatives such as the facilitation service did offer the potential to act as a catalyst for such new relationships to be framed, which could help local people to access power and resources, perhaps in unintended ways. In this sense the spaces potentially enabled new kinds of connections and identifications between officials and citizens, although I would suggest that such connections were more pronounced in the spaces produced and structured by the community groups, as I shall discuss in Chapters Five and Six. Indeed as already suggested, a consideration of the forms of interaction and collective action that were

valued by local people might have led to a different approach to such meetings.

Therefore in the next three chapters I will explore spaces of collective action, or public spaces, through the perspectives of the community groups. Within these, the local state is always present but is not their fundamental driver. Indeed, although I want to draw attention to the possibilities which may arise from state interventions, I feel that my empirical work in the two neighbourhoods demonstrates that 'public spaces' cannot ultimately be controlled or shaped by the state, although they may be formed through negotiations and intertwinings with government in significant ways. In the following chapter I consider the two neighbourhoods that set up particular contexts for the groups' projects. Experiences of these neighbourhoods are structured by a range of discourses, feelings and interactions, of which the workings of local government is only one aspect.

Chapter Four

Experiencing the neighbourhood

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I set out the ways in which the localities of my research are experienced as a particular spatial and social scale. These feelings about the neighbourhood relate to discursive constructions as well as material affects and embodied experiences and practices. Overall, I want to show how, from the groups' perspectives, the neighbourhoods frame potentials for different forms of public space, which both limit and open up possibilities for their own projects.

As will become clear, residents often seemed to have conflicting and ambiguous feelings or experiences about the neighbourhoods. Indeed, rather than thinking in terms of a rigid tying-down of space and politics, I want to explore the notion of places having different 'potentials', which are never fully realised but can co-exist in fluid and sometimes contradictory tensions. A range of potentials and possibilities co-existed in these neighbourhood spaces, which the groups needed to negotiate.

After a broader discussion about the neighbourhood as a scale of political engagement, I will explore four sets of dynamics around the neighbourhoods which circulate locally, all of which suggest different versions of publicness or public spaces. I begin by looking at some of the positive understandings which circulate about the two localities,

particularly in terms of sociable and family-based connections between residents. I then move on to considering a kind of 'flip-side' of this dynamic, whereby relations between local people are defined by senses of fragmentation and fearfulness, especially when considering relationships between different generations, and there is a feeling of decline or abandonment around public space.

I then briefly discuss how these neighbourhoods are understood by local authority officials and how this in turn affects the feelings of residents about where they live. Finally I look at the relationships between the two estates and regeneration projects on other nearby estates, which I suggest set up important dynamics for the neighbourhoods themselves. These last two sections clearly tie in to the issues discussed in the previous chapter, around government and official attempts to shape certain versions of the public. Here however, the focus is more specifically on the dynamics of neighbourhood spaces.

It should be noted here that I am exploring feelings about the neighbourhoods and public space primarily from the perspectives of the two groups, rather than other local residents, although of course these perspectives overlap. This is because I am ultimately interested in what frames and enables the groups' particular projects. It is also a methodological issue, in that I gathered my material about the neighbourhoods through conversations with group members. Most of these conversations took place informally, sometimes on the phone or sometimes just as short remarks during my visits. It will be apparent that

these conversations took place most frequently with the two chairs of the groups, Sandra and Jill.³⁹ This was partly practical, in that they were always my first point of contact with the groups. However, it also reflects their own engagement in that, as the groups' founders and leaders, they are generally the most heavily involved but also the most overtly reflective and analytical. They are also both used to talking about their work to outsiders, to being the public face of the projects. Overall I would estimate that their views generally reflect the views of the rest of the group, although of course I can't be definite about this and I did occasionally hear some dissent from other group members about decisions or opinions expressed by the chairs.

4.2 The politics of the neighbourhood

Before getting into the substance of my discussion, I want to reflect briefly on the status of 'the neighbourhood' as a setting for interaction and collective action. Even when I wasn't specifically asking about it, the neighbourhood as a context was frequently present in my discussions with group members. However this was not always talked about in straightforward terms. It might also be referred to as 'the estate', 'the local area', or perhaps more ambiguously 'the community', a term which I will consider below. These words had a variety of shifting discursive meanings for the two groups, and other terms were also implicated, such as 'local residents', 'local people' or even 'social life'. As well as being

³⁹ This also applies to other aspects of my fieldwork material - see my discussion in Chapter Two around such conversations with Sandra and Jill.

used to talk about their own projects, both 'neighbourhood' and 'community' were used endlessly by local government officials and policy programmes, in phrases such as 'Neighbourhood Action Plans' and the 'City Community Forum', terms which are part of the everyday experiences and vocabulary of the groups. Such a framework of 'policy-speak' clearly shapes the groups' work, although might also be held at a critical distance (Rose 1997b). However, rather than try to separate out these various strands I want to discuss this nexus of feelings as a whole, under the idea of 'neighbourhood', partly because this term clearly has spatial implications.

In considering the public spaces of these neighbourhoods, I want to suggest that the issues raised here tie in directly with the debates around the nature of the public introduced in previous chapters, even though I am only now explicitly introducing such a setting or scale for such debates. However, the extent to which small-scale neighbourhoods or communities are seen as appropriate settings from which to consider broad issues around the nature of politics and democracy is contentious. Therefore in the rest of this section I am going to discuss this issue in relation to theoretical debates.

In Chapter Two, I discussed the ways in which the practice of ethnography has traditionally involved researchers entering communities that have tended to be presented as static or bounded contexts in which particular 'cultures' can be observed. As discussed, however, understandings of place and culture have now moved on, to seeing them as much more

dynamic, processual and relational (Massey 1993, 1994, 1995), to the extent that the practice of going to one or more particular locations to do research may seem redundant. Indeed Cloke et al (2002) suggest that ethnographers should be thinking rather in terms of 'networks' along which research may be undertaken.

Nonetheless, as they also argue, particular places, 'neighbourhoods' and 'communities' do continue to have significance in the world, although as researchers we should think about places as actively practised, contested, made and remade rather than having some kind of stable existence. Indeed, the ways in which places are constructed as bounded categories should be seen as the subject of critical enquiry; in other words questions should be asked about why they are presented as such, and to what ends. Overall, therefore, we should think about places as 'meeting places' (Massey 1994) made through discourses, imaginings and memories as well as material affects and embodied experiences. In this way places are also made through relationships with other places, and other sites of representation, such as the media and government policy. As David Sibley (1995: 34) suggests, within feelings about a neighbourhood, 'local, national and domestic scales are all linked'.

Therefore, in considering neighbourhoods as a particular social and spatial setting, and in particular as producing certain versions of 'the public', there is a need to consider how and why such a setting becomes important. Crucially, within the kinds of policy propositions put forward by the current UK government that I set out in Chapter One, it is often essentially

'neighbourhood politics' which are proposed as the basis for a reconstitution of the public (eg Home Office/ODPM 2005). Indeed the idea of 'connecting' people to government on a very localised basis is a key feature of the kinds of policy initiatives already discussed, from those around becoming consumers of public services to more participatory projects. Clearly, as noted elsewhere, this is bound up with the central theme of the 'third way' project around making politics concerned with more 'everyday' issues around family and community, rather than broader structural social and ideological goals (Giddens 1994,1998).

However, in much of the more critical theoretical writing on public space and on the public which I referred to in Chapter One, paradigms of 'neighbourhood' and perhaps more importantly, 'community', as settings for politics are seen in broadly negative terms, precisely because it is assumed that they fail to deal with the complexity of society as a whole. Indeed this conflation of 'the public' with neighbourhood and community scales has been a specific starting point for criticism of New Labour's politics (Cooper 1998). Given that such a criticism might also be levelled at the arguments I am making about the spaces of the community groups, I am going to dwell on this point here in order to draw out why I am nonetheless focusing on public spaces within 'neighbourhood' settings.

In terms of a broader critique, beyond considerations of particular policy discourses, both Richard Sennett (1970, 1986) and Iris Marion Young (1990b) suggest that 'community' in particular should actually be understood as a kind of opposite of 'the public' as a political entity, and

indeed Sennett characterises it as 'emotional withdrawal from society' (1986: 301) and 'a fear of experiences that might create complexity and disorder' (1970: 51). Young writes that an ideal of community:

...implies a model of the good society as consisting of decentralised small units which is both unrealistic and politically undesirable, and which avoids the political question of just relations among such decentralised communities...Politics must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and distance' (1990b: 33-4).

Indeed, writers from Jane Jacobs (1961) onwards have drawn attention to the value of anonymity and contact with 'strangers' in urban public spaces (see also Shonfield 1998). Calhoun (1999) argues that 'community' as both a scale and an ideal functions around interpersonal and informal relationships, but that 'publics (by contrast to families and communities) are arenas in which people speak to each other at least in part as strangers' (222).

The emphasis on 'strangers' as an aspect of publicness suggests a notion of 'difference' which is seen as either not present within smaller scale or more intimate settings, or is indeed actively suppressed. As both empirical setting and as an abstract ideal, therefore, this scale of politics is seen as not allowing for the kinds of encounters, contests, connections and alliances which should make up the public. Ali Madanipour (2003) argues that 'neighbourhood' space, at least in a paradigmatic sense, is inherently conservative, partly because it is too bound up with private life. He

suggests that neighbourhood spaces are characterised by 'exposure, conformism and control' where both the 'publicness of public spaces and privacy of the domestic sphere are challenged' (136).

I do not want to suggest that 'conservative' impulses might not be present in the places where I undertook research. However, to pick up on Madanipour's point specifically, part of my interest in the spaces of the community groups is precisely the ways in which they are bound up with 'private lives', and how this might disrupt clear boundaries between the public and the private. Moreover, to simply suggest that such spaces cannot be thought of as public risks tying down what constitutes political or democratic spaces within traditional categories and hierarchies of thought. As discussed in Chapter One, this issue is very much bound up with gendered forms of politics, so a concept of the public that excludes private lives potentially excludes areas of experience associated with women in particular. More generally though, this suggests that private and intimate lives or concerns can somehow be dealt with or secured, prior to entering the public as an impersonal realm of politics. This ties in with the critical appraisals of Habermas' writing by commentators such as Nancy Fraser (1993), discussed in Chapter One, who question whether such a move is possible for all groups in society.

An alternative approach would see that private lives represent an important starting point for collective engagement, and indeed a writer like Young would undoubtedly agree with this (1990a, 2000). Gibson-Graham (2001) also discuss locality and community as crucial scales of political

engagement, in terms of new formations of subjectivity and from that of collective action. Indeed, I would want to suggest that this may be particularly the case for those who do not have straightforward access to conventional spaces of politics, like those with whom I did research. Therefore it is important to recognise that what constitutes 'public space' may vary in different locations. Genberg (2002) explores a very stark illustration of this when discussing 'public spaces' in wartime Beirut,⁴⁰ where he argues that the domestic settings of private houses represented important 'public spaces' because it was impossible for people to congregate in more conventional collective spaces.

Of course, it should be recognised that the reasons that 'the neighbourhood', and related issues around family and private lives are promoted, by, for example, 'Third Way' policies, do not necessarily follow this logic, and may indeed be precisely a means to avoid tackling more difficult political and ideological issues. However, in considering the spaces of the two neighbourhoods on an empirical basis (and in always holding such a category up for critical questioning) I hope that over the course of the thesis it will become clear that the value of political interaction and indeed subjectivities cannot be validated in terms of scale alone.

⁴⁰ Coincidentally, as I shall explore in the third section of this chapter, the image of 'Beirut' was used by residents in both neighbourhoods to describe public spaces. Indeed the term was used so ubiquitously it was hard to know what meaning to draw from it, but it does suggest a strong sense of threat to public or collective life.

Therefore if we take on board the notion of places as relational, complex 'meeting places', then this challenges us to think differently about localised sites (Massey 1993, 1994). As I will go on to show over subsequent chapters, both neighbourhoods are indeed meeting places for different groups in various ways, and are places where ideological contest is present. I also want to show that the kinds of politics I hope to draw out have implications beyond the neighbourhood setting. Both groups were involved with various city-wide forums and initiatives around community participation, and more broadly I would suggest that it is important to tie neighbourhood-based movements into other arenas of politics, or to form alliances with those in other places.

Indeed, to return to current government policy, whilst government regeneration initiatives may aim to 'empower' local communities, this is often understood only at a spatially limited scale, and as already noted this may impede more broad-based political and social change. Hilary Wainwright (2003), discussing the New Deal for Communities programme, suggests that it is set up with a deliberately limited scope in terms of what is viewed as appropriate for residents to become involved in. However, she argues that despite this intention the process can potentially unlock politics 'which go beyond the neighbourhood boundaries paternalistically set by the government' (38). Overall, therefore, I want to consider the neighbourhoods as important sites of collective action, although in more complex ways than either policy-orientated or some critical academic accounts suggest.

4.3 Introducing the neighbourhoods

On a more straightforward level though, I want to begin by describing the two localities within which the groups operate. The area I am calling 'Riverlands' is effectively an adjunct area of approximately 500 houses to a much larger housing estate, which I am calling 'East Town'. However not only has Riverlands been separated politically from East Town, through exclusion from the Single Regeneration Budget programme (which I shall discuss in the final section of this chapter) it is also physically distinct as much of the housing in Riverlands has metal cladding in yellow and green. This was built as temporary housing to deal with shortages after the Second World War, "emergency housing" as one of the residents put it. It was initially modernised in the 1960s when a lot of such housing was demolished and new council houses built to replace what *The Sentinel* at the time called, 'those ugly relics of post-war austerity, the prefabs' (3/10/64). The area is locally called 'Tin Town' because of the housing. None of the residents I spoke to said that they disliked the look of the houses, though, and some people said they liked it. Much of this housing is now owner-occupied. Sandra, the chair of the residents' association told me that when they had moved away to a nearby estate at one time, it hadn't 'felt right living in a brick house'.

Riverlands is therefore a small area, of essentially five or six streets, but it is talked about by both residents and workers as a distinct estate and locality. When I asked one residents' association volunteer how long he

had lived in the 'area' he told me twelve years, and he told me the street where he had lived before that, which was actually only two streets away. As well as the metal-clad housing there are some less distinctive brick semis, some modern single storey housing for elderly people, a number of small corner shops and take-aways, as well as a pub and a secondary school. However the neighbourhood is also bordered by a main road, on which there is a Co-op and a range of other shops. The design of East Town, built later, in the 1960s, was apparently inspired by the Garden City Movement, and both East Town and Riverlands are laid out to a low density, with lots of green spaces in between streets and areas of housing. In particular a large area of green space with a stream running through it separates Riverlands from East Town. There is a bus service from stops on the main road to Hanley (around a 15 minute ride away) although this is very infrequent at night, with only one bus an hour. Even during the day the bus service did not appear to be very well-used and those that had cars relied on them.

Westfields, by contrast, is a much larger estate, of around 1,800 households, although by people outside the area it is also referred to as part of a wider group of four local estates. It was mostly built in the 1950s, with some further later developments, and is predominantly semi-detached housing, with some blocks of flats and an area of bungalows for elderly people. There is a shopping arcade at its centre, in which around half the units are empty, but which includes a large Co-op, a butchers, a newsagents, a chip shop and bookmakers. There are three pubs, two churches and a primary school and secondary school. As in Riverlands,

there are some large areas of green space. In particular there is an area of green space enclosed within the estate known as 'the Millpond' where there is a pond, a small area of woodland and some open space. Hanley is a 20-minute bus journey away, and the bus service seemed reasonably frequent and well-used. People also go to nearby Longton to shop, although it is more difficult to get to without a car. 'If you want to go to Longton, forget it, blink and you've missed it', said one of committee members about the bus service.

I hope that the rest of this chapter will give a qualitative sense of what it is like to live in these neighbourhoods. In Section 4.6, I discuss feelings around living in places which are described, primarily by officials, as 'disadvantaged' or 'deprived'. I also discuss some of the difficulties of statistical evaluations of such deprivation. However, it should be noted upfront that residents in both neighbourhoods did face many material difficulties, and these are reflected in available statistics. Recent council ward-based plans (Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2005a, 2005b) highlight issues around health, education and low-income in particular. In both neighbourhoods there are high levels of 'limiting long term illness', indeed in Westfields a quarter of working-age people are classified as having such a condition. Also in both areas, around half of the working-age population have no formal qualifications. In Riverlands approximately a fifth of all households have an income of less than £10,000; in Westfields this is over a quarter. The statistics also show that in terms of population, both areas are almost exclusively white. There is a slightly higher proportion of elderly people in Westfields compared to the city average.

4.4 Thriving places?

The work of the two groups seemed strongly motivated by a very positive understanding of the potential for collective life and spaces within the neighbourhoods. Throughout my fieldwork, members of the community groups expressed an often passionate commitment to their localities. People talked about “loving” the areas, never wanting to move away. I heard a number of stories about friends and relatives who had moved away but ended up wanting to come back again. When I asked people why they liked their areas they talked about feeling comfortable, about friends and relatives locally, and sociability between them. I became aware in both areas of extended networks of families locally, with up to four generations living nearby. One elderly woman I met in Riverlands had three children, fourteen grandchildren, and two great grandchildren living locally, with four more ‘on the way’ at the time we spoke about it. ‘We’re always round each other’s houses’ she told me, and indeed a resident on East Town spoke to me about the importance of ‘family geographies’ locally.⁴¹ Although people often talked about knocking on each neighbours’ doors, these relationships were also enacted in outdoor spaces.

This kind of sociability was particularly referred to in Riverlands. As Sandra told me, ‘I mean you walk out your front door and out your front

⁴¹ This comment was perhaps influenced by her knowledge that I was studying geography!

gate and you've got somebody to speak to, somebody'll speak to you'. She went on to describe it as 'a very close knit community, everybody watches out for everybody else. Everybody knows everybody else and everybody knows everybody's kids'. Indeed children seemed to play a key role in these networks, perhaps because of their particular use of the neighbourhood spaces. Adults told me that they had got to know each other through their kids, who walked to school together or played outside together. 'We're all friends in this street' one young teenager told me. The residents' association was aware of this in terms of their more specific project of involving more residents in their work: I was told on a number of occasions, 'We get to the adults through the kids'.

The local area was therefore experienced as a site of sociability, of friendly but also caring connections made through conversations, memories and embodied encounters on door-steps, front gardens and on the pavement. This suggests the potential for a particular version of publicness, and indeed of public spaces. The residents' association use this potential in their own work, and therefore tended to emphasise it in the way they talked about the area. I myself experienced a sense of this sociability in Riverlands. In the street where the community house was located there were nearly always children playing outside when it was light at the weekends or on summer evenings, as well as people in their front gardens. Once I got to know people I often saw children or adults that I knew around and this made arriving there pleasurable.

However, I don't want to suggest that this rather utopian sense of the public is anything more than a partial reflection of people's experiences and understandings of neighbourhood spaces in Riverlands. Alongside this there were many more negative experiences, as I shall go on to discuss in the next section, but also just more prosaic evaluations, such as people saying that the area was 'alright', or 'not too bad'. Even in its more benign evocations, this sense of community and neighbourhood space does suggest a high level of visibility in local spaces, people 'watching out' for each other, but also just watching. This ties in with the issues I set out in the introduction about the neighbourhood as a site in which forms of 'difference' may not be tolerated.

I sometimes felt aware of a dynamic around surveillance and difference whilst doing fieldwork, although there was a subtle line between others being simply 'visible' within neighbourhood spaces and senses of intolerance and exclusion. I shall discuss the ways in which young people were often talked about within neighbourhood spaces later in this chapter, and I also heard comments about 'problem families', whose gardens were a mess and so on. In terms of other kinds of 'difference', as already noted, both Riverlands and Westfields are overwhelmingly white (Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2005a, 2005b). A sense of racialised identities occasionally came into focus for me during the fieldwork, and raised questions about the kinds of neighbourhood dynamics that could come arise in a context where there was such an emphasis on 'visibility'.

For example, on one occasion I was present at the community house with a group of teenage girls waiting for an activity session to begin. One girl was sitting by the window watching a new family move into one of the houses and describing the family and what they were taking into the house to the rest of the room. At one point she said 'they're brown', meaning their skin colour. Nothing more was said about their racial origin but she continued commenting on their possessions in a rather critical manner, and I suddenly felt uncomfortable in the room. This was a difficult moment to interpret, and indeed in Chapter Six I shall focus more on issues of race and how this might be constructed as a specific form of 'difference' in such a context. Certainly it should be noted that the Westfields group did make efforts to work with other ethnic groups. At this stage I just want to draw attention to the potentially less benign aspects of the 'everybody knowing everybody else' dynamics which the group drew attention to within the neighbourhood.

In Westfields there was a similar sense of commitment to the area and attachment to the people, although the group were less focused on this idea of a 'close-knit' community. When I asked about it, they tended to say that the estate was so big, they couldn't really say that there was 'community spirit' as such. In relation to the work of the residents' association in particular, they often said that they had successfully engaged some parts of the estate and not others. When I asked Sylvia, the secretary, whether the work of the residents' association had increased a 'sense of community' locally she said that she didn't know. This strikes me now as a thoughtful answer and perhaps reflects the fact

that the group have been established longer than Riverlands and have a somewhat more measured approach to the claims they make.

Nonetheless, I also came across extended family networks in Westfields and there was definitely a culture of people talking to each other on the streets, of neighbourly sociable connections. The central shopping area, for all its empty units and dilapidation, still provided a space where people's paths crossed. The shops that were there were popular, for example there were often queues outside the butchers. It wasn't long before I started seeing people that I knew there myself. On one occasion on my way to the community bungalow I saw the treasurer of the residents' association, Karen, talking to someone in the shopping area. She turned up at the bungalow (which was just adjacent), over an hour later saying that whenever she went out, she saw someone she knew, and then time would just fly.

However, generally when more utopian senses of place were discussed in Westfields it tended to be in relation to the past. Jill said that when she first came to the estate it was 'thriving...four churches, and the churches were all thriving and the community and the schools' and I heard other evocations of how much better the area and its collective life used to be. This was clearly a partial picture, because I also heard the same people talking about how much worse the poverty was in the past, or how the same issues around young people (which I shall go on to discuss below) were present. Nevertheless, again, discussions about community in the

past emphasised certain potentials or possibilities in neighbourhood spaces which the group wanted to highlight in their own activities.

In particular, the Westfields group used images or ideas of the estate in the past to make points about the extent to which local government had withdrawn investment from the area and contributed to the senses of decline of public life that I shall discuss in the following section.⁴² After Jill had described the estate when she first arrived I asked her what had changed and she said, 'I think a lot of it was to do with government changes – lack of funding, lack of investment'. Whilst walking around the estate with Sylvia, the secretary, I asked her whether it had changed since she lived there and she said that now it was more 'uncared for...it looks a mess'. I sensed that she meant that the services and maintenance provided were failing rather than the fault lying with the residents; indeed she went on to say that there was a limit to what the residents' association could do to improve the estate. In Westfields, these issues were particularly strongly linked to the decline of the central shopping area, which I shall move on to discuss in the following section, which focuses particularly on more negative experiences of spaces and interactions within the localities. This section has aimed to give a sense of the more positive potentials in the public spaces of the neighbourhoods, as these were understood by the groups.

⁴² For example at the meeting about the shopping centre which I discuss in Chapter Six, a number of residents spoke in glowing terms about the estate in the past.

4.5 'Little Beirut'

4.5.1 Westfields shopping centre

As I have already suggested, these neighbourhood spaces, and the senses of the public which they produced, seemed to be understood in contradictory ways, both by different local people, and also by individuals having a range of responses to them. I am proposing that one way to understand this is through the idea of spaces having different potentials, which are never fully realised, but can co-exist. This is perhaps especially true of the shopping arcade on Westfields, which is a highly contested space, and seems to be experienced in particularly charged ways, or has potentials which are particularly intense. I am going to discuss the past and present of the space in some detail, as I believe it represents an important context for the residents' association's work. More broadly, I want to set this particular space within a narrative of a kind of abandoned and fragmented public, where connections between local people are defined by fearfulness, rather than the sociability and enjoyment referred to earlier.

The arcade is very important in the discussions about the estate in the past: I heard it described as a 'beautiful' place, which made people feel 'proud'. The story of decline since then does have a very material reality, because a number of quite stark physical changes have occurred in the last five or so years. The arcade was originally designed to include both

housing and commercial units, but this seems to have become increasingly problematic because of what is now called 'anti-social behaviour' around the space.⁴³ In this context this refers to groups of young people hanging around, perhaps committing acts of vandalism or behaving in an intimidating way towards people (see Campbell 1993).

Such behaviour is understood by many local people to undermine the possibility of collective use of the space. According to the local housing officer, because of 'anti-social behaviour' the housing on the square became impossible to let, and a whole row of housing, making up one side of the square, was demolished around four years ago in response. Whilst this may seem a somewhat extreme solution to buildings that are unpopular or problematic, Ruth Lupton (2003) reports that such 'selective demolition' is a common practice on housing estates with low demand. The same housing officer told me that they had also demolished some housing on a neighbouring estate, essentially as a means to evict the families living there.

Such a practice suggests that 'public space' could be somehow restored through physically removing material spaces and therefore excluding certain uses of them, in a particularly dramatic mode of 'remaking the public' through authoritarian interventions. Not surprisingly, this does not

⁴³'Anti-social behaviour' is a term associated with government policy and legal interventions. It was first introduced as an official legal term in the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998, which introduced 'Anti-Social Behaviour Orders' aimed at tackling offenders. The act broadly defines anti-social behaviour as 'behaviour which causes harassment, alarm or distress to one or more people who are not in the same household as the perpetrator' (Home Office 2002). I touch on the term and associated behaviours at various points throughout the thesis.

appear to have been successful on Westfields, where the space seems to have remained as problematic as ever. Indeed one immediate problem with this approach is that it left behind a patch of overgrown scrub-land. Apart from this space, many other units in the arcade have been abandoned and boarded up. A large space above the Co-op supermarket, which had once been a dancing school, is empty, as are a number of the shopping units and the flats above the units, although a couple of them are still used as temporary accommodation for homeless people.

The condition of the square is recognised as a problem by the local authority and ever since the demolition of the housing a number of plans for its redevelopment seem to have been proposed. According to the residents' association endless consultation meetings and focus groups have been arranged, masterplans drawn up and consultants engaged. Whilst it was hard for me to work out exactly what had stopped these plans moving forward, the bottom line seemed to have been a lack of funds to proceed with. As discussed in the previous chapter, Westfields had not been prioritised within local strategies for investment in housing, and was clearly not seen as an area with much 'strategic' economic potential. The issue of the proposed redevelopment came to a particular head whilst I was doing fieldwork there, with plans for any serious redevelopment being effectively withdrawn and much-scaled down plans

for 'architectural treatment' of existing shops being proposed, with some further demolition of adjoining housing.⁴⁴

The residents' association have a particular stake in the arcade as they have long wanted to take over space there for their own use. Three years ago they developed plans and a package of funding and partnerships to take over a large empty space above the Co-op supermarket, and a long-term business plan was put together. However, planning permission was not granted, apparently at the last minute, because of the 'bigger picture' for the square, meaning its comprehensive redevelopment, which of course has since been abandoned. In Chapter Six I will discuss some of the specific ways in which the residents' association have responded to this situation. At this point, I essentially want to draw attention to the fact that the arcade is particularly significant for the group.

When I was first arranging to visit them, Jill said to me on the phone, 'look out for the boarded-up shops, it looks like Beirut, that's where we live'. On another occasion (at a public meeting about the situation) she described it as a 'derelict slum'. I felt that the space did arouse real feelings of despair and frustration at times, particularly for Jill, as it seemed to demonstrate an effective abandonment of the estate by the local authority, and also perhaps the group's own failure to halt this process. In particular it

⁴⁴ Since finishing the fieldwork, however, more ambitious plans for the centre have again been mooted, under the framework of a new 'vision' for the area which should receive some funding from the Housing Market Renewal Fund.

seemed to crystallise a sense that both the group and the wider estate were not seen as important or a priority by local government.⁴⁵

4.5.2 Young people and public space

Apart from the particular feelings of group members there were also more pervasive discussions and feelings on Westfields around problems to do with the shopping centre. As already mentioned, in particular it was frequently referred to in relation to groups of young people and the trouble they caused 'hanging around' there. This is clearly not a unique situation. Indeed, many writers have argued (Lucas 1998; Matthews et al 1999; Valentine 1996, 1997, 2004) that young people's presence in public space is currently experienced in particularly charged ways, which need to be thought of within the context of broader constructions of youth as a form of 'difference' or otherness in relation to adulthood. Such constructions can be seen as circulating through media representations and policy discourses as much as direct experiences.

Certainly the extent and significance of this issue locally was very much contested. I found it difficult to make a judgement about how much of a problem it was, or even what specifically the groups of young people were doing, beyond the term 'anti-social behaviour', which I found was used by local people as well as officials. When I pressed Jill on this on one

⁴⁵ I will discuss how the group position themselves in relation to other local estates and issues in the final section of this chapter, but on one occasion when I was talking to Jill about the group she said that she wished they'd put less energy into wider area initiatives, 'sometimes I wish we'd stuck to fighting for our own corner'.

occasion she said, 'It's not crime as such, nothing serious, just causing a bit of trouble'.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, in forums of discussion about collective life and spaces on both estates, such concerns about young people usually dominated. Indeed, whilst recognising the ways in which this issue is 'discursively constructed', it clearly also has 'real' impacts, including generating material senses of fear and affecting people's everyday uses of space. On Westfields the issue tended to be raised by elderly people at residents' association open meetings. They clearly felt particularly vulnerable in relation to such groups of young people, and this was exacerbated by the location of old people's bungalows just behind the shopping arcade. 'We're living in a 24 hour nightmare', a man who lived there said at one such meeting. One of the group members told me that she felt too frightened to walk past the shopping centre at night, because the kids were abusive and shouted swear words at her. More generally it seemed to be particularly at night that groups of young people were experienced as a problem. I also heard about kids climbing on the roofs of the shops. As already noted, this was of particular concern to the local housing officer, who was in discussion with the police about getting a 'dispersal order' in place for the arcade, which would give them powers to break-up gatherings of young people, again a very material attempt at exclusions in order to restore a version of public space.

⁴⁶ The term anti-social behaviour was questioned to a considerable extent: not just by local people as I shall discuss, but by officials. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, one of the neighbourhood wardens at Riverlands said 'What was called fun when I was a child is now called 'anti-social behaviour'.

The Westfields housing officer was also involved with broader issues of 'anti-social behaviour' and had worked with police and social services on serving an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) on one local young man, who from what I could gather was involved in an ongoing violent feud with another family.⁴⁷ Other children had signed up to Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) which were a kind of pre-ASBO process. However the housing officer told me that it was difficult to get residents to come forward with information about troublesome children, apparently because they were scared about violent repercussions. This seemed to be tied up with certain families in particular. Private detectives were employed at times in order to gather evidence about individuals.

As described, there is no doubt that some residents did feel scared by such young people. However a more pervasive sense of living in 'Beirut', or as another young woman described it, 'The Bronx', had arguably also been heightened by the authorities' responses to the issue. As I have discussed, these focused primarily on exclusions and even the physical removal of parts of the built environment. This created a sense of a place under 'siege', where a process of negotiation over public space had broken down. As well as the removal of the housing in the shopping centre, phone boxes and bus stops had been withdrawn from the estate. Members of the residents' association often told me that kids on the estate had ASBOs and ABCs, as if it were a defining characteristic of the area.

⁴⁷ This housing officer also told me that she would like to work in more positive ways with local young people, as I mentioned in Chapter Three.

At the time when I was doing fieldwork these mechanisms were being much discussed in the local and national press, so such initiatives worked to categorise Westfields as a certain kind of neighbourhood within broader cultural constructions. I remember a number of occasions when members of the Westfields groups spoke about news reports around anti-social behaviour, often saying that what happened on their estate was much worse than what they'd seen on the news.

The response of the authorities also served to reinforce and support the views of those residents, especially the elderly, who saw young people on the estate as particularly problematic. The residents' association often found that their own work was limited by the official weight given to such opinions. In particular, the elderly people who lived by the arcade were very vociferous. For example they were able to block proposals by the residents' association to do some temporary landscaping of the empty plots of land, to make a space which was at least properly designed for young people to hang out in. Indeed, I discovered that over time a number of plans that the residents' association had developed to provide facilities or activities for young people had been blocked by local opposition. Most fundamentally, it was a condition of the lease of their building that they did not have teenagers in it, because of the feelings of people living nearby. In such ways young people were essentially excluded from attempts to develop new kinds of public spaces, and were generally not seen as capable of making positive contributions to collective life.

The residents' group, who are mostly mothers, generally sought to mediate between young people and the negative views which circulated locally. Jill said to me, 'we stick up for them, nobody else does'. The group did recognise that there were young people who caused problems, but generally they tended to down-play these problems in favour of defending the young people's right to be in neighbourhood spaces. When I spoke to Sylvia about this whilst driving around the estate she said clearly that she did not think that there was a big problem with teenagers hanging around, but a lot of other residents thought that there was. She did recognise that people felt more scared and fearful in the streets but she said that that was not really to do with the estate in particular, 'that's just the way we live now'.

Nonetheless, as I have explored, her views were certainly not shared by everyone locally, and Jill told me that such conflicting views made it hard for them to represent the whole estate and 'balance priorities'. As I shall discuss in the next chapter, the group's meetings could become very difficult because of the conflicting views on this issue. This highlights the ways in which the formation, through the group's work, of new spaces, or new senses of the public, necessarily involved contest and difference.

Similar senses of fear in neighbourhood spaces seemed to affect the Riverlands area. On one of the first visits I made there, during a discussion which I taped, one of the group members, Sally, told me that one street corner was known locally as 'little Beirut'. I found this harder to understand than in Westfields because there are no boarded-up shops or

empty houses in the same way. However she seemed to be referring to certain families or households that caused problems, particularly in relation to drug-taking:

You've got certain areas, like top of one street they all seem to move in that area, on the whole I'd say that most streets get on, but you've got the odd bad area haven't you, really bad, drugs and that'.

On the same occasion Sandra also told me that there was drug-dealing and prostitution going on in the street where the community house was based, although she said that that was tolerated as long as it didn't affect other people:

well, they used to keep themselves to themselves, it didn't hurt anybody else, it's when it starts encroaching on other people's lives that it becomes a problem... which it has just lately.

Looking back at my notes this seems to be the only time we explicitly discussed this issue. As noted in Chapter Two, I think Sandra felt more comfortable (as did I) talking about positive aspects of life on the estate, or it may have also been that the situation became less significant.

Nonetheless I did hear from professional workers that drug and alcohol abuse were big problems locally, so it was hard for me to reach a judgement on this issue.

Much more pervasive though, were ongoing issues with young people, and senses of fearfulness associated with their presence in neighbourhood spaces. When I spoke to a group of elderly women who

met regularly at the house they told me that they generally liked the area although they said there were 'too many sixteen and seventeen year-olds taking over the streets'. Again they clearly did experience this as a material problem which affected their everyday practices around the neighbourhood. Mick told me that elderly people would often cross the street if they saw a group of teenagers. Indeed this group for the elderly had been set up because of people feeling isolated in their homes, and scared of being on the streets.

Riverlands residents' association don't organise 'open meetings' for residents to raise issues in the way that Westfields do, although their annual AGM did provide such a forum. At the Riverlands AGM the overriding topic of discussion was the behaviour of young people on the streets, and the (mainly older) people who spoke described living in a fearful environment. They recounted kids throwing things at their windows and doors, again climbing on roofs, and being abusive. Again children and young people were seen as a dominant and negative presence in neighbourhood spaces, with whom negotiation around a shared sense of publicness seemed impossible. Sandra spoke to me about the 'negative light' in which young people locally were seen, 'you know, all youth are useless, they're no good, they cause trouble on the streets'. Indeed, as on Westfields, whilst young people were seen to dominate outdoor spaces in

a destructive way, spaces of decision-making and representation generally excluded their voices.⁴⁸

At the Riverlands AGM one man in particular said how shocked he was to see young kids out at 11.30 at night, and I felt on both estates that such discussions reflected broader concerns, especially among the older generation, about the breakdown of family life. Once more, this is not to downplay real experiences of fear, but I felt that this was heightened by a more general sense of children being out of control, and parents as unwilling or unable to curb their behaviour. When these issues were discussed certain families and households were seen as the locus of bad behaviour and possibly violence.⁴⁹ For example, at the AGM a councillor reported that a number of local families were now 'under surveillance'.

Again, it was very hard for me to make an assessment of these issues and their significance was contested locally. Unlike Westfields, Riverlands does not have a central meeting place, but the corner shops, which stayed open late, were focal points for groups of young people congregating at night, as well as certain street corners. Apart from this it was very unusual to see anybody on the streets after dark. The areas of green space which bordered some streets formed huge areas of darkness at night and I personally found walking alongside them threatening. However when I asked Sandra whether she thought one particular space was frightening

⁴⁸ For example, an issue which was never discussed was the extent to which young people themselves felt intimidated by other young people in outdoor spaces. Yet young people mentioned being frightened of 'the gangs' to me on a number of occasions.

⁴⁹ Lupton (2003: 116) discusses the circulation of 'local folklore' regarding 'problem families' within the neighbourhoods that were the basis of her study.

she said no, and seemed offended that I might suggest that. Nonetheless all the group members tended to travel around by car after dark.

Indeed like the Westfields group, the Riverlands residents' association tended to generally down-play problems associated with young people, fear and neighbourhood spaces. On one occasion Sandra was talking about some 'difficult' young people from East Town, whom the group had been asked to include in one of their projects, 'they've been seen doing terrible things like sitting on people's walls and talking', she said sarcastically. Barbara, the group's treasurer told me that the young people on the estate hang around wherever there's a bit of light, 'basically they're just bored'. The group tended to analyse the issue in terms of the failure of local services to provide for young people. Sandra told me that the worst thing about the estate was the 'lack of facilities, anything for the children, anything for the old folks, anything for the mid-range, anything for anybody basically, it just hasn't been there'.

Overall, for both groups, issues around young people, related senses of fear and antagonism, and the need to negotiate conflicting perspectives around this, were probably the biggest challenge that they faced in their work. Indeed, within certain times and spaces, these dynamics threatened to fragment any real sense of publicness within the neighbourhoods. The responses by local authorities and agencies, to attempt to exclude young people from public spaces through authoritarian measures, seemed to heighten rather than resolve tensions, against a background of broader fears about young people's behaviour and the breakdown of family life.

When I asked the Westfields group at a discussion session about the whole issue they said that they 'didn't really know what the answer is'. However, as I shall go on to show in the following chapters, both groups did work to develop new kinds of public space, which were more inclusive and which suggested ways of both recognising, and negotiating around, the different needs of age groups within the neighbourhoods.

4.6 Places with problems?

In the previous two sections I have tried to provide a sense of the ways in which the neighbourhoods are experienced by people locally, and what versions of public space or publicness such experiences present. I want to suggest that the neighbourhoods are experienced in both positive and negative ways, as sites of sociability and pleasure as well as fear, disorder and fragmentation. Such dynamics set up 'potentials' for the two community groups which both opened up and limited how they might seek to make new kinds of public spaces through their own work.

Of course, these feelings are not solely based on personal experiences and memories over time, but are linked to discourses and feelings from elsewhere. For example, I mentioned that issues around 'anti-social behaviour' were much discussed in the media at the time of my fieldwork, and on a broader level, the kinds of narratives of decline around community and public space on the estates can be seen as linked to discourses which circulate nationally as well as locally. In this section I want to consider briefly the effects for the groups of living in

neighbourhoods which were seen as 'difficult' or 'disadvantaged', by local people generally, as well as centrally by local government officials and within policy discourses. This could set up quite complex feelings about the neighbourhoods which affected how the groups approached their spatial and political projects, and indeed formed an important background to their work.

Riverlands and Westfields, the two places where I was doing fieldwork, are seen as quite problematic by people in the Stoke area generally, although they are not the most 'notorious' estates locally either. However I sometimes got negative reactions from other local people when I told them where I was working. I was told by local residents that the local paper, *The Sentinel*, tended to portray the estates negatively, although I didn't come across any specific examples of this. I was also told by two residents on East Town, the larger estate which Riverlands borders, that it was harder to get loans or buy things on hire purchase in their postcode.

In terms of local authority views, both estates scored fairly high on the 'indices of deprivation' used by central government, and as noted in Section 4.3, particularly in specific areas relating to income, health and education (Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2005a, 2005b). Such figures were frequently referred to in my discussions with local authority officials, and indeed if I asked officials to describe one of the neighbourhoods they tended to begin by mentioning these indices. Clearly they often had to mobilise such statistics in making arguments for funding from central government.

Also as noted earlier, these figures obviously reflect real hardship and disadvantage, and on the most basic level I was aware of people in both areas struggling with the income they had. For example, Jill from Westfields told me that the kids' club they ran wasn't so well attended on a Monday because there was a charge of 50p a session and people collected benefits on a Tuesday, and that by Monday they had run out of money.

However, generally Jill and others in Westfields seemed to struggle to class themselves as 'deprived' or 'disadvantaged' in the way that policy discourses and officials clearly did. When I asked about problems, residents sometimes referred to their own neighbourhood favourably as compared to others, either locally or nationally, and to places they had seen on the TV and so on. There was a sense of the stigma which goes with saying that you are poor or disadvantaged. On a number of occasions residents also talked about the poverty being much worse in the past than it was now. One woman recalled not having money for bedclothes and sleeping under coats when she was a child. When I asked somebody from a different community group in the Westfields area about her estate she said 'Well, it's classed as deprived which I hate'.

I should point out here that because of this stigma, it may have been particularly difficult for residents to talk to me, as an outsider, about aspects of deprivation and disadvantage. A Sure Start worker from

Westfields told me that she had worked as a mid-wife for a long time in the area, but it was only when she started to get to know local people in a more intensive and intimate way (through the Sure Start programme) that she was told about the extent of problems such as depression and drug use.

Nonetheless, the Riverlands group did not seem to struggle with this classification of disadvantage in the same way.⁵⁰ On one of the first occasions when I met Sandra she spoke to me about her daughter who was studying engineering at university. She said to me, 'It's a really big achievement, for somebody from a deprived area like this'. I realised with time that Sandra in particular used many terms from policy discourses, and indeed she often referred to the estate as deprived or disadvantaged or poor. On another occasion, when she had been speaking about the area in generally very positive terms she said 'the two biggest issues for this estate are domestic violence and personal debt'. It later emerged that these had been the issues as defined at a recent community forum meeting led by the council (see Chapter Three).

Clearly Sandra did see her neighbourhood partly in this way, but I felt that this perception and way of talking had been intensified through her struggle to get money and services coming into the estate. As already mentioned, the neighbouring estate, East Town, had been the subject of a

⁵⁰ My own (clearly partial and anecdotal) qualitative impression of the Riverlands area was that there was less poverty than in Westfields: in Riverlands I met more people who were in work and education, less who had chronic health problems or were living in very difficult domestic circumstances. Indeed this was born out by statistics, which show Westfields as somewhat 'more deprived' across all indicators.

Single Regeneration Budget programme of investment, whilst they 'got nothing'. It was believed that this was because Riverlands was not seen as 'disadvantaged' enough when their statistics were compared with those of East Town; and the group were determined to prove the authorities wrong.⁵¹ Indeed I will discuss relations between the group and the regeneration projects on East Town in the final section of this chapter.

In Westfields, the dispute over the shopping centre sparked off a similar sense that it might be important for them to start seeing themselves as 'needy'. At one stage the residents' association was told by a local authority officer that plans for the square had now effectively been 'shelved'. They responded to this by organising an open meeting, attended by over 100 residents, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Six. The MP who was speaking at the meeting said a number of times that this was one of the most deprived wards in the country. People in the audience clearly didn't like this and started to make comments like 'It never used to be', and 'I love this area'. When Jill spoke at the meeting she said that Westfields musn't be 'too proud' to admit that it needed investment and services. She spoke about the specific need for more shops and told an anecdote about meeting a woman in tears because the Co-op had run out of meat and the butchers was closed. Her stories seemed to make more sense to the audience than the MP's descriptions in terms of statistics and 'deprivation'.

⁵¹ After my fieldwork was officially over a similar situation was developing over distribution of the Housing Market Renewal Fund, which again East Town was poised to benefit from. It was clear that Riverlands also suffered because of its proximity to a wealthier neighbourhood, with which it was sometimes classed together for purposes of measuring 'need' – see Stoke on Trent City Council 2005.

This idea of being in an area defined as deprived or as having problems was important to the groups' success in attracting funding and services. Nonetheless, such definitions clearly went against many local people's instinctive feelings about the neighbourhood and added further ambivalence and complexity to their views of the localities. Within their own projects, the groups therefore needed to both assert their 'deprivation' as an area, and to develop collective spaces and actions based on a sense of the positive potentials of the neighbourhoods. When talking to people at Westfields, whose memories and subjectivities were bound up with the area, it seemed difficult for them to accept the kinds of abstract classifications used by policy officials. On Riverlands, this issue was complicated by their relationship with the neighbouring estate, East Town, and its classification as more 'deprived'. In the final section of this chapter I am going to explore the relationships between the two estates and neighbouring areas, and how they impact on feelings about neighbourhood and public space.

4.7 Talking to the neighbours

As already mentioned, there are multiple connections between the two groups and other community projects and organisations. Both groups are tied into local training schemes and joint initiatives of various kinds which involve contact with other similar community groups and residents' associations. Here I am going to focus on what seemed to be the most significant of these relationships, which were with regeneration and community projects on neighbouring estates. Such relationships gave the groups a sense of both potentials and dangers for their own projects. The issues raised clearly tie in to my discussion in the previous chapter around official attempts to construct certain versions of public space. Here my intention is to focus on this at the level of the neighbourhood, and specific implications for the groups' own projects to develop spaces which enabled collective action, or public spaces.

4.7.1 SRB on East Town

When I asked Sandra and one of the other committee members how and why the residents' association had been set up, they started telling me how they'd got fed up with the condition of the housing, but then Sandra stopped herself. 'No, but before that, East Town'. She then paused rather dramatically before explaining that East Town had received large amounts of SRB (Single Regeneration Budget) money and that Riverlands 'was totally left out'. As already explained, Riverlands is effectively joined on to East Town, and the relationship between the two localities, and the

community activities which went on in them, were clearly highly significant for the Riverlands group. Although they did have links to other neighbouring estates and community groups, I am going to focus here on East Town as the most important.

East Town is a far larger estate; it has around 10,000 properties, mostly semi-detached, and, like Riverlands, designed at a low density with lots of green spaces in between streets and areas of housing. The SRB scheme was a seven year programme which began in 1996 and had a budget of approximately £20 million to spend on housing, education, employment, training, health, young people and community safety (Stoke-on-Trent City Council 1995). The programme had therefore officially wound down some months before I started my fieldwork, although a number of initiatives begun under SRB were continuing, with varying degrees of funding and commitment for the longer term, whilst others were stopping completely. Under the programme, a significant amount of investment had apparently gone into renovating the exteriors of the houses and the gardens, and creating new fences. This was mentioned by a number of people as a successful aspect of the scheme, and was presumably the kind of investment which the Riverlands group resented. Another, longer term project, which was initiated under SRB but was still held up in negotiations at the time of my fieldwork, was a new health and community centre to be built on the central shopping arcade.

However, I am going to concentrate here on considering the structures and experiences of community involvement, or public participation, on

East Town, as it was these aspects of the SRB which seemed most striking to the Riverlands group, and which I often discussed with them. These initiatives clearly chimed with their own project of developing new forms of engagement and connection between residents, and of opening up new spaces where such processes could take place.

The size of East Town was felt to be problematic by those running the regeneration programme, in terms of their aspirations for developing a more 'active community' or politically and socially engaged sense of public. Both the scale and layout of the estate was seen to make it unmanageable in this regard. It was therefore proposed that the regeneration area be broken up into 'villages' and indeed the SRB scheme was named 'The Villages Initiative'. As well as this question of scale such a term enabled the scheme to avoid being labelled with the name 'East Town', which was quite notorious around Stoke, more so than Riverlands or Westfields. It also suggested that East Town might be understood as somewhere rural rather than urban, which, given the amount of green space around the estate, did seem possible.⁵² At the beginning of the programme, the aims behind it were expressed in this way:

Our vision for East-Town is of a place where opportunities are embraced and potential is maximised for the benefit of the whole community – for large-scale, monochrome estates to be transformed into manageable and sustainable communities by

⁵² Indeed the design of East Town was apparently inspired by the Garden City movement, and this idea of a kind of bucolic place was sometimes present in discussions about the estate. At the opening of a summer fete on East Town, the mayor said from where he was standing, 'I could be in the countryside'.

redefining the area into distinct settlements and promoting the development of community-inspired regeneration. (Stoke-on-Trent City Council 1995: 8)

As far as I am aware, this particular idea did not result in any physical interventions but projects did take place within the various 'villages' and village-based forums were set up as a mechanism for local involvement. These forums also then met in one wider meeting called the Joint Forum. The Joint Forum was based at a new community resource centre in the central shopping arcade of the estate, which was staffed by local people. Other initiatives led by residents were also based there. Aside from these forums, no doubt over the course of the programme there were countless other meetings, forums and projects which sought the participation of local people.

Obviously my research was not extensive enough to amount to a definitive evaluation of community participation in the SRB programme. However, none of the residents or organisations that I met on the estate were positive about the experience. One community development worker who was running a volunteers project on the estate, and had been working there since the mid-1980s, told me that the SRB 'didn't really have any effect on the area'. Indeed, in terms of the idea of active and 'empowered' communities, she said she thought that the impact had been negative. The idea of the villages had not worked, but rather further divided the estate, and the overall process had opened up rifts and stirred up resentment. She believed that there was already a good 'sense of

community' on the estate, but that the programme had failed to engage this.

Essentially it seemed that meaningful resident involvement in the process had never moved beyond a small group, with a core of perhaps four or five individuals. Sandra at Riverlands told me that 'there are no more residents involved now than there were on day one'. One woman in particular, Margaret, had become heavily involved, and had taken on the job of setting up and running the community resource centre, which she continued to do at the time of the fieldwork, although the future of the centre was then up for question, and it did not appear to be well-used. Both Margaret and another man I met who was involved were unusual in an area of very low participation in higher education, in that they both had degrees from Staffordshire University, and had worked professionally away from the estate. She told me that she had got involved because she could do things 'that others couldn't, like taking minutes', and she said that she had benefited personally from the programme, 'I've done lots of training, got new skills'. Nonetheless, she could see that overall relationships between those running the programme and residents had not been successful. 'It was always just us (meaning her small group) and the suits'. Margaret said that the suits 'used too much jargon, it was offputting and they couldn't be bothered to explain things to people'.

The focus on this small group clearly caused resentment among other residents. Two volunteers with the community development project mentioned earlier complained to me about 'all those hotel trips and meals'

which those involved had got. They had been doing community projects for years, working with the elderly and young people in particular, yet became increasingly disillusioned by the SRB process. Indeed the project worker complained about the 'upstarts' who benefited from the programme as compared to those who had always done, and continued to do, community work.⁵³ This ties in to my discussion in the previous chapter around the lack of inclusivity within public participation initiatives initiated by local authorities.

Therefore, although I was told by people I met from outside East Town that the SRB programme had improved the reputation of the area, it seemed that the programme had failed to generate new connections between residents or to open up new sites of collective engagement. The volunteers' project demonstrated that impulses around helping others, and in particular working with different age groups, were present locally, but that the SRB programme had failed to tap into these. From what I saw, the spaces of participation opened up by the project broadly failed to create connections between different groups, whether that be between local authority officials and citizens, between different groups of residents, or between teenagers or the elderly. Overall, the attempt to open up new kinds of public space on the estate seemed to have been a failure, although of course this was clearly a very complex project.

⁵³ There were also suggestions that those who had been involved (including local councillors) had successfully campaigned for improvements and investment on their particular patches of the estate, essentially amounting to a form of corruption.

I often spoke to Sandra and her husband Mick about the situation at East Town, and indeed they attended some of the meetings and forums set up by the SRB process. They clearly felt that the community forums and the centre set up by the SRB represented negative examples of spaces in which to engage local people. Indeed, the 'buzz' and atmosphere around at the Riverlands house and in the spaces in which the group worked, was a stark contrast to the centre on East Town, and others, as well as the group themselves, made this comparison. I attended a Joint Forum meeting in the centre where the discussion was around involving young people. 'We've tried inviting them to meetings, they don't show up' one of the councillors said. A community warden who was present said that she had just been to the Riverlands house, 'it's wonderful there, that's what young people want, somewhere to chill out'. This was in comparison to the more formal youth activities on offer for young people on East Town.

'It feels stale up there doesn't it?' Sandra once said when discussing East Town, and she explained this by saying 'people up there, they've had things done to them, everything's been imposed'. This backed up her own conviction that local people should be in control of what happened at Riverlands as far as possible, and she described their own organisation as 'user-led'. In this sense the Riverlands group's spaces sought to be supported, rather than led by, local government. This involved a series of complex negotiations with the local authority and agencies, as I shall discuss in the next chapter.

Sandra and Mick were friendly enough with Margaret and others on East Town, whom they regularly met at meetings, and they sometimes borrowed equipment from the community resource centre. The Riverlands group did also meet with other local groups more informally to exchange ideas, and as I shall discuss in Chapter Six, towards the end of my research planned a joint event with a local Muslim group. They also participate in various city-wide forums and meetings. However for most of the time I spent with them, they were clear that their first loyalty was to the Riverlands area and to developing projects and activities there. For example, over the summer they negotiated with the council play services to have more sessions held on Riverlands rather than East Town. Such competitive dynamics, which were arguably enhanced by the selective nature of regeneration funding, do suggest some of the limitations to the kinds of public spaces the Riverlands group developed, in terms of connecting with groups and issues in other areas. However the Riverlands group clearly had limited resources and time, and indeed as they became more successful as a group they told me that they had more visits from residents in other areas wanting to work on similar projects.

4.7.2 Westfields: working together?

By contrast, the Westfields group seemed to collaborate more actively with other community groups in the wider area. I think that they realised that this was quite an achievement for a neighbourhood-based organisation, and mentioned it often. Specifically, they were part of a group of five local residents' associations called the 'Community Play For All Group', which had successfully campaigned and fundraised for four new children's play

areas, and since then had worked on developing sports facilities for older children. They also collaborated with a number of groups to fund-raise for and organise a festival in the summer, which I discuss in Chapter Six. The groups also met more informally on other occasions, and indeed when I first visited Westfields they were having a cup of tea with the chair of another local group.

Such collaborations were not without some tensions and ambivalences. I mentioned earlier that Jill once said to me that she sometimes wished they'd 'stuck to fighting our own corner'. On reflection, I felt she was thinking specifically of a group on the next estate which up until recently had operated from a house in similar circumstances to their group.

However, through a mixture of perseverance, circumstance, and a large unexpected donation from a local celebrity they had become partners in the development of a brand-new community centre. This generated some resentment among the Riverlands group, and it seemed to compound a sense of frustration with their own position. They also felt that the services being offered at the new centre would be potentially 'in competition' with the courses and activities that they ran. This neighbouring group won the 'Community Group of the Year' award given out by the city council which generated some disgruntled comments. Nonetheless, when I said to Jill that I was sure they were right to keep working with other groups, she said that yes, she knew it was right in the long term.

Among the five groups who worked together on the community play facilities, one had started as a residents' association but had gradually

become a professionally-run community centre. In a situation again echoing that of the Westfields group, a local residents' association had successfully negotiated the redevelopment of some empty shop units into a centre, around eight years previously. The management of the centre by the original group had not been successful, and eventually a new management structure was put in place with a paid director and some other paid staff. However, I heard that the centre continued to have financial difficulties and Sylvia, the Westfields secretary, said to me once that she didn't want them to end up like that, having a 'great big centre' to run and no money to pay for it. I also had the impression that the centre, which now has a focus on employment and skills, wasn't as well used locally as it might have been.

Although this centre seemed to illustrate some of the pitfalls of growing too quickly away from being a residents' association, the director felt that a professionally-run centre was far more beneficial locally than a resident-led initiative. During my interview with her she was highly critical of the local residents' associations, including Westfields, saying:

...they're only interested in their own neighbourhoods, there's too much competition between them. They don't realise it's important for people to work together.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ This ties in to my discussion in the previous chapter around how officials understand the nature and role of participation by local groups. Indeed this same worker raised concerns about resident involvement focusing too much around 'the usual suspects' rather than forming a more representative public.

As on Riverlands then, the Westfields group were very aware of the kinds of projects taking place on neighbouring estates, and the issues these raised for their own projects of developing spaces of participation for residents. In particular these other projects suggested some of the ways in which attempts to engage local residents might succeed or fail.

Engaging with these projects also set up some tensions in terms of prioritising their own neighbourhood and the needs of those living there, and reaching out and working with others.

4.8 Conclusions

This chapter has worked to show the multiple and complex ways in which the two neighbourhoods are experienced as a particular scale, or site of engagement for the groups. I have discussed four sets of dynamics which set up different narratives and feelings about the neighbourhoods, and in turn affect the projects of the groups. Firstly I explored the feelings and practices of positive sociability, of neighbourly and family connections, which circulate in both areas and which suggest that public spaces could be constituted through such relationships. Nonetheless I also raised questions about whether such feelings and practices might in themselves exclude those seen as 'different'. Indeed, simultaneous with these feelings was a much more fragmented and fear-laden sense of the public, in which connections between generations in particular appeared to have completely broken down. This is tied in to both local officials' responses and broader narratives from the media and national policy initiatives, as well as day-to-day encounters and practices around neighbourhood

spaces. All this contributes to contexts in which attempts were made to exclude young people entirely from both outdoor neighbourhood spaces and sites of participation and decision-making.

Such understandings about the potential of the neighbourhoods are clearly partly structured by the accounts and interventions of local government, and I have discussed the ways in which classifications around 'deprivation' created further tensions for the groups in seeking to generate collective identities and action. Finally, I explored relations with projects on neighbouring estates, which suggest some of the difficulties and possibilities in opening up new spaces of engagement for local people. They also raise issues about the scale at which the groups concentrated their own energies. All these dynamics frame how the groups approached their own spaces, and their own versions of publicness, which I will explore in the next two chapters.

Chapter Five

The everyday spaces of the groups

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Analysing public space

In this and the following chapter I am going to explore the ways in which the two community groups produce particular kinds of public spaces, through their activities at the community houses and other projects around the neighbourhoods. In this chapter I will explore what I am calling the 'everyday' spaces of the groups, as opposed to spaces which constitute particular 'occasions' which I discuss in Chapter Six.

As Murray Low argues in relation to what he calls 'spaces of democracy' (2004:143), there are many different kinds of political spaces and projects in cities, from carnivals and 'direct action' to virtual spaces of various kinds and more formal spaces of deliberative decision-making. The spaces I will go on to explore represent one version of public space, which does not necessarily supersede or replace other versions. Indeed I have already discussed a range of kinds of potentially public spaces, from outdoor spaces in the neighbourhoods, to forums of interaction with local government and the spaces of opinion in the local newspaper.

However, I do want to suggest that the spaces I explore here may be particularly significant and indeed productive locally. They should be thought about in relation to the kinds of feelings around the public, and experiences of space, which I discussed in the previous chapters. In particular they relate to some of the issues which I highlighted around the relationship between the public and the local state in Chapter Three, and some of the neighbourhood-based feelings and experiences which I discussed in Chapter Four. Within both these contexts it was my intention to demonstrate the potentials for difficulties, exclusions and a sense of a fragmentation of 'the public', and more positive dynamics around forms of connection and identification between people. It is against this background that the work of the two groups should be understood, as enabling certain forms of interaction and collective action.

In these chapters I intend to weave my analysis around the key themes for approaching public space that I introduced in Chapter One. Specifically I want to draw attention to the different practices through which spaces are made or produced, which range from shared material activities, ongoing talk, informal interaction, and the production of discursive texts, to forms of performance and symbolic display. As already indicated, I am particularly interested in the material and affective dimensions of such practices as being key to the overall success of the spaces. These practices involve a series of negotiations; between different groups and individuals locally, between private and public spheres of action, and linked to this between the informality of family and social connections, and the formality of state-led bureaucracy. Within these negotiations both groups place an

emphasis on nurturing and supporting individual aspirations and achievements, of enabling certain forms of subjectivity. Therefore by the end of the next two chapters I should be able to draw out conclusions around the four themes as previously set out: the forms of spatiality which make up public space; the negotiation of difference; the relationship between public and private, and the kinds of subjectivities involved; and the links between the public and the state.

5.1.2 Spatial projects

As already noted, I am dividing up the space of the two groups into day-to-day, ongoing or 'everyday' spaces and spaces which constitute particular 'occasions' which I will deal with in Chapter Six. This sense of two modes of temporality springs primarily from my own observations of the way the groups work. They both have a routine of activities that is roughly the same on a week-by-week basis. These routines are punctuated by events, such as parties and festivals, which tend to be planned, prepared for and discussed some time in advance, and reflected on afterwards.

Therefore I am not beginning with a particular theoretical notion of what constitutes the 'everyday' (eg de Certeau 1984) or an 'occasion' (eg Hetherington 1998), and indeed such a distinction is of course not categorical. An 'everyday' meeting can develop a sense of being a particularly significant event or occasion, and many of the occasions and events the groups put on take place annually, and therefore have a sense of ongoing routine about them. Nonetheless, I hope that some differences between these two kinds of spaces, and their particular modes of politics

or publicness, will become clear over the course of the chapters. In particular, in Chapter Six, I want to show how the more 'visible' and obviously 'public' spaces of occasions bring the groups into contact with other arenas of power, or forms of politics.

In the case of Riverlands, their day-to-day spaces are primarily the 'community house' where they are based, as well as other spaces around the neighbourhood where they undertake activities, including the local school, park and allotment site. The Westfields group effectively operate from two buildings, a 'community bungalow' and a hall which they share with a day-care centre for the elderly. Again they also do ongoing activities and projects outside of these venues, including green spaces and schools. However in this chapter my primary focus will be the main places they operate from, the community houses and the community hall.

In the body of this chapter I will discuss the 'everyday' spaces of each group in turn, which revolve essentially around the buildings they are based in. For each group, I will begin by introducing these spaces and then make some broad points about the kinds of practices and negotiations involved in these spaces. I will then provide some more specific ethnographic accounts of time spent with the groups during my fieldwork. For the Riverlands group, this will primarily focus on time spent with teenagers and children, whilst for the Westfields group this will cover time spent in their 'office' as well as at 'open' residents' meetings and working with children.

In taking 'public space' as a starting point for analysing the projects of the two groups, I am clearly working within the understanding that spatiality is an intrinsic aspect of these projects, that the spaces both shape and are shaped by their activities in an inseparable way. It is worth noting in passing at the outset that this perspective seemed to be shared by my research participants, although they would not have expressed this in terms of 'spatiality' or even 'public space'. However, as should become apparent in what follows, for the two groups spaces seemed to have been understood as an intrinsic part of their collective identities and objectives. I think that they would have found it very difficult to conceive of themselves separately from these spaces.

For example, the groups officially existed as residents' associations before they had definable bases from which to operate, but they both seemed to view their move into houses as the 'real' beginning of their work. Sandra from Riverlands told me that it wasn't until they got the house that they properly 'got going'. The Westfields group were more established before they moved into their bungalow, but in fact Jill told me that nearly all the existing committee members left and new ones joined at the time of the move. With the responsibility of the bungalow, they needed people involved who were more actively committed in a different way, who could make regular commitments to be present in the house and take responsibility for the running of the activities there.

Furthermore, at the time of my fieldwork, both groups were looking beyond their existing spaces with the aim of developing new bases for their

activities. The Westfields group were campaigning for a 'proper community centre', whilst Riverlands were negotiating taking over a Portakabin where they could operate a youth club. These ambitions were both about very material considerations, in terms of having enough space to offer new services and activities, and also had a more symbolic dimension in terms of gaining an established and visible presence locally. Jill at Westfields sometimes complained that the bungalow they had was too hidden away, 'people don't realise we're here'. Whilst discussing the possibility of a new space with some members of the Westfields group, Karen commented that they needed somewhere where people might come in for a cup of tea and chat whilst waiting for the bus. She thought that over time this might lead to generating other kinds of involvement with the group. In these ways, a sense of the importance of spatial practices was appreciated by the groups.

5.2 Riverlands

5.2.1 The community house and the group

As already mentioned, the identity and aims of the Riverlands residents' association seemed to be very strongly linked to the community house in which they are based, and I will therefore be dwelling on it in some detail. Everything associated with the group was ultimately located there: even when they undertook activities and went on trips elsewhere, the house was always the meeting place, and where we would reconvene at the end of the day. Sandra often invited officials or other groups to 'come down to

the community house' in order for them to understand what the group were about.

The house is the same as the others on the street, distinguished only by posters in the window and a metal sign saying Riverlands Residents' Association (provided by one of the committee members who had run a small metal-works before he retired, and still had contacts). Inside there is a fairly large front room, separated by sliding doors from a smaller back-room or kitchen. The front room has tables and chairs that can be moved around to accommodate different activities. The kitchen is fitted out with a cooker and fridge, as well as having an area of further seating and storage space.

Upstairs there are two bedroom size rooms and a smaller room, which would originally have been a bathroom. The small room has been turned into an office space with filing cabinets, a photocopier and computer. One of the bedrooms forms a larger computer suite, with around five computers in it used for training courses. The front bedroom is known as the 'Chill Out Zone', and officially 'belongs' to young people. It was decorated by a group of them (as part of a community arts project), and is equipped with computer games and music. Out the back of the house is a large garden, around 50ft long. This was done up with help from Prince's Trust volunteers, laying turf and planting flower beds, as well as creating a hard play area for children. There tended to be lots of large outdoor toys lying around in the garden, bicycles and wendy houses and so on.

The group were given the house on a rent-free basis by the council about eight months before I started my fieldwork. Indeed, as I have already begun to explore, to a certain extent the spaces of the group can be seen as co-produced with the local authority, firstly on this very material level in terms of the provision of premises. Beyond this, both the Riverlands and Westfields groups have government funding for some of their projects and also undertake many activities jointly with local authority departments or initiatives. Sandra told me that overall, 'we've had loads of support from the council, loads', and she had developed good contacts with a number of officials, as I discussed in relation to the facilitation service in Chapter Three. As I also noted, it is clear that the group were effectively providing local services that might have been provided by the local authority themselves, so such support is not surprising.

The group had decorated and fitted out the house themselves, and although small amounts of grant money had enabled them to buy equipment and furniture from time to time, there still seemed to be an ethos of people bringing spare items in from home, fixing things up themselves, and so on. It certainly didn't look like a formal community centre or facility. However, there were always lots of leaflets and posters from the council or other agencies around, stuck up on the walls or in piles in the front room, and indeed over the course of my fieldwork the group acquired some more official-looking display stands and noticeboards. I shall return to this issue of the space being both formal and informal in Section 5.2.2, below.

The Riverlands group is run by a committee of around eight, although people's involvement tended to slightly drift in and out over time. Of these half were men, including Mick, Sandra's husband. Although neither Sandra nor Mick were in paid employment, a number of other committee members had jobs, and in some cases they brought particular skills from their work life to the group and to the running of the house. For example, one of the committee members worked in IT at the local hospital, so he oversaw the computers at the community house. This committee held an evening meeting around every six weeks to oversee the running of the group. More active and visible on a day-to-day basis though, was a network of volunteers, some of whom were also committee members, who ran sessions at the house and activities on an ongoing basis. The volunteers on the whole seemed not be in paid employment, and in many cases were full-time parents, retired or on long-term incapacity benefits.

When I asked Sandra and another committee member why the group were set up, they presented their aims in terms of a broad commitment to bringing people together socially and providing them with things to do together.⁵⁵ Sandra explained this by comparing themselves to another group whose aims were solely to do with stopping children hanging around on a particular street corner:

⁵⁵ The group's constitution formally describes their objectives as: 'To improve the quality of life for people living in the area of benefit by: promoting independence and self-support; creating opportunities for the advancement of education; providing facilities in the interests of social welfare for recreation and leisure time occupation with the object of improving the conditions of life; establishing, or securing the establishment of a community centre'. Although these clearly cover their activities of training, social events, encouraging volunteering and so on, when I asked Sandra and Mick about them they were clearly not referred back to on an ongoing basis, and I felt that more situated discussions and negotiations better reflected the group's purposes.

'Riverlands Residents' didn't come together over one issue, it was, the community, what can we do to improve the lives of people round here, rather than, we want to shift these youths from outside [....] but it was more, we were more concerned with the quality of life, social aspect of life round here, the services which weren't being provided that should be provided, so it wasn't just something like that'.

It is interesting here that Sandra contrasts their approach and politics to an approach which focuses solely on what is visibly happening in outdoor spaces. Rather they take a broader approach to the dynamics of the neighbourhood, suggested in terms like 'community'; 'quality of life'; 'social aspect of life', and this provides them with a more challenging, and more long term agenda. It also suggests a different way of thinking about the potentials within neighbourhood spaces, in which possibilities for positive change might be opened up, rather than seeking to exclude those who are seen as difficult.

Such a broad and ambitious agenda was reflected in what happened in the community house. There was essentially a weekly round of activities, although this changed over time, and was flexible when other events or activities took place instead. At the time of my fieldwork there were weekly consultation and advice sessions, with workers from the Citizens Advice Bureau and from the local housing office. There were also more occasional sessions with the police and with the local MP. Then there were slots for different age groups to meet on a weekly or more frequent basis, including sessions for teenagers, under 13s, parents and toddlers,

and senior citizens. These sessions often involved organised activities of various kinds, which I will discuss below. Other activities at the house included training courses on the computers and in more practical skills like first aid. Aside from all these activities, though, there were also times when the house was just open for people to drop into, and in fact coming in at any time 'for a cup of tea and a chat' was actively encouraged.

5.2.2 Negotiations

As already suggested, the space of the community house was characterised by a series of negotiations, which I will explore in this section in order to pull out some of my arguments around the nature of the public spaces being produced. Perhaps the most obvious of these negotiations was between different groups of people undertaking activities in the house. The atmosphere changed at times of the day, when different activities were taking place. Often these happened concurrently: there might be young people in the kitchen, a Citizens Advice Bureau consultation happening in the front room, and some children upstairs doing their homework on the computers. Using the same space enabled some tentative connections to be made between the groups. Sandra said to me on my very first visit to the house that it was a place where 'people's paths cross, they might just look at each other - it's a start'. This clearly needs to be understood against the background of tensions between generations within the neighbourhood, as discussed in the previous chapter. In such ways the group understood the need for the recognition of the demands of different age groups, as well as taking steps towards negotiation across such differences.

Indeed the house was often being used predominantly by one group or another, and a need for different 'territories', or spaces within the overall space, was clearly acknowledged. I have already mentioned that one of the upstairs rooms had been given over to teenagers as 'their' space. Over time as well, the house changed as these groups came and went. For example, the senior citizens' group, which met one day a week in the front room, had a fairly structured programme of activities revolving around bingo, tea-drinking and chat, although this later expanded to include health checks and a fitness session. When they were in there seemed to be bouts of raucous conversation followed by intense quiet concentration during the bingo. The session was essentially organised by an elderly woman.

However, Sandra, Mick and other volunteers who happened to be there would 'help out' – making tea, calling the bingo, and especially helping the group members, several of whom were in wheelchairs, in and out of the room. This 'helping out' was an informal undertaking, with no particular expectation around how many volunteers would be there or for how long. Helping in this way was also a chance to see other volunteers, find out what else was going on and have a cup of tea and a chat. One of the volunteers (a 19-year old man) told me 'if I'm around, I'll just swing by when the old folks are in'. Another young woman who started helping out told me how surprised she was by the kinds of things the old people discussed. These 'helping out' activities therefore offered the potential to

re-frame relationships between groups within the neighbourhood, between whom there were normally tensions.

The arrangements with volunteers were perhaps so informal partly because Sandra, the chair of the group, and Mick her husband seemed to be an almost constant presence in the community house. Their own family house was next door, where they lived with three teenage children, who themselves were also heavily involved both as volunteers and participants in various activities. In this way, there was a strong sense of continuity between domestic or family life and the more public life of the house. At times, for example when preparing for a big event, Sandra and Mick's house also became used for the group's activities.

This crossover between private and public life was not without difficulties. Mick told me that they had liked the idea of being next door initially, 'we thought that way we could keep an eye on the place', but in practice it meant that they never had a break from it, as they put it, they were always 'in and out'. Although the house was only officially 'open' at certain times throughout the week, in practice people turning up when it was closed normally took it upon themselves to go and knock on their door. In particular, Sandra told me about people turning up with 'problems', for example neighbourhood disputes, which they wanted help with. Mick and Sandra often spoke about being 'exhausted' and never getting a day off. That said, they were also clearly passionate about their work and this sense of personal involvement was an explicit part of their approach. For example, Sandra once told me that they wanted to offer support to

residents all the time, whenever they needed it, not just between certain hours on certain days like many formal services.

Indeed it was not just Sandra and Mick who dropped in and out of the house throughout the day. The space was very much characterised by fluidity and informality at all times. Another family who lived opposite, and who were also heavily involved in various ways, were 'back and forth all the time' between their house and the community house. If it was nice weather the door tended to be open, with people standing in the doorway, smoking or talking to people who were smoking (which was not allowed inside). In any weather there were often groups of young people and children hanging around outside, maybe on bikes, just seeing what was going on or waiting for an activity to start. Otherwise people stood around in the kitchen, or sat in the front room, drinking tea and coffee or squash. Even in rooms where more structured activities were taking place there would be people wandering in and out, sitting down 'just for a couple of minutes' to catch up on news.

The house therefore combined routine, with its weekly programme of activities, with this sense of fluidity and informality, of unplanned encounters, discussions and events. When arriving I never quite knew what would be going on. Aside from any particular 'sessions' taking place, there might be someone fixing a new piece of equipment or mending something in the kitchen, or the committee members sitting down and talking over a cup of tea. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter Two, when I first started going there I found the informality of the place difficult to get

used to, and would arrange meetings to talk about specific subjects. However with time I began to get used to the idea of just arriving unannounced. Sometimes I encountered council officers or other professionals who had come, usually to talk to Sandra about something. They were occasionally taken upstairs to sit in the 'office' ('to get a bit of quiet'), but at other times they would just stand or sit around like everyone else.

As already mentioned, this kind of dynamic was clearly valued by the group, and people were continually encouraged to 'drop by'. The newsletters which were produced around four times a year also highlighted this, with one edition stating, 'you are assured of a very warm welcome'. I did generally find this to be the case. Of course 'dropping by' is easier if you live near, and those that used the house regularly did tend to live within walking distance, if not on the same street. This suggests some of the ways in which these kind of dynamics and practices might exclude those not living in the very immediate area, and therefore perhaps the limits to developing collective spaces through such informal approaches.

This point brings up issues of accountability as a public space, of the need for the house to work as more than a private meeting place for family and friends. Indeed other kinds of negotiation took place around how far the house became an 'official' space structured in certain ways. The pressure to become more 'organised' (within a certain definition of that) came partly from bodies that were funding them, or organisations they worked with like

the local voluntary action bureau. The group therefore had to produce documents such as an equal opportunities policy, a health and safety policy and so on, which were displayed on the wall in the house. There was also a book for signing in and out of the house, which was fairly assiduously filled in.

Another significant manifestation of the group's involvement with more official structures and practices were the training courses which they took part in. Courses on subjects like first aid, health and safety, food hygiene, and working with children were continually being offered to the group. Certificates were always given to participants at the end, and after I had been doing the fieldwork for about six months, the group began to display them on a wall in the front room of the house. This was named 'the wall of achievement', on a banner at the top. When Mick showed me the wall the first time he said, 'We just had so many of the things we thought we might as well put them up somewhere'. Apart from perhaps indicating a certain modesty about putting up the certificates, this comment also suggests a sense of ambivalence about the training, for which they often struggled to round up enough attendees.

The group were certainly not in awe of officialdom for its own sake. On one occasion when I was at the house, Mick was filling in some forms in order to get a 'kite mark' for the group's work with children. He had to produce all kinds of official documentation around child protection, volunteer policies and more. A youth worker who was there with me at the time asked him whether he wanted any help. 'No, don't worry', he said,

'We just find these policies on the internet and adapt them a bit for ourselves'. Generally the group seemed to make a point of not becoming bogged down in bureaucracy or procedures. A newsletter advertising their AGM began, 'The AGM is not a stuffy affair but is very informal and welcoming'. Nonetheless the group did run an AGM, at which committee members were formally elected.

Indeed, to return to the example of the kite mark for working with children, Mick had made a positive decision to fill in the forms. All the qualifications and official processes did signal that they were moving on and developing, both individually and collectively as a group, that they had achieved something, and that this could be recognised outside of an informal sphere of family and friends. Some of the group members told me with a sense of achievement about the courses they had taken, perhaps particularly those who were looking to get back into employment. Over time the group had won various local awards, which were on display in the house, including Stoke-on-Trent's 'community group of the year'. Also up on the walls in the main downstairs room were lots of photos of past projects and events. A whole wall in the kitchen was given over to celebrating the 'Dream Scheme', a volunteering project with young people, which I shall discuss further in the following section.

More broadly, 'getting organised' could be done in a way that helped the group, on their own terms. In fact the signing-in book, which also included contact details, was seen as useful for the group, especially when children were around, 'if someone goes missing we know who's missing and who

to get in touch with', one of the committee members told me, although he admitted 'usually we know which house the child comes from anyway, it's just the odd one we don't know'. Also 'House Rules' were on display including, 'No swearing, No physical or verbal aggression, No name calling', and so on. These 'rules' did seem to be largely followed, and indeed probably made more sense to people in the house than the more abstract points about discrimination on the equal opportunities policy, also on display.

Therefore in among everyday conversations, jokes and gossip, the house was also a place of focused reflection, planning and action to further the ambitions of the group. Aside from the committee meetings which were more formal occasions for discussion, there were always lots of ideas floating around for future projects, a wildlife pond, a film with young people, yoga for the elderly. Some of the ideas never happened, or lay dormant and then resurfaced, but the house provided a space where such half-formed plans could be aired.

To pull together what I have been discussing in this section, I want to show how a series of tensions, between different groups who used the spaces, between domestic life and the activities of the group, and between informality and officialdom, framed the spaces of the Riverlands community house. Despite the difficulties of these tensions (for example Sandra and Mick's feelings of 'never having a break'), overall I would suggest that they were actually productive. Unlike both the outside spaces of the streets, and the formal spaces of political participation set up

by local government, the house was extremely well used by local people, was somewhere where they felt 'comfortable', yet could also be a space of more structured personal achievement and collective action. Therefore the Riverlands community house provides a certain version of 'public space', albeit one which interacts with both 'private' or domestic space and more official, state-led structures.

Tracey Skelton (2000), discussing a community project in the Welsh valleys, makes a similar point about the way in which the space can be understood as both public and private. This makes it particularly positive for the group of teenage girls she researched, who struggled to find spaces to hang out safely on the streets. Overall many people, both local residents and officials, commented to me on the positive influence that the presence of the community house was having on the area. It constituted a space which could be used by different groups, particularly different age groups, in a range of ways, rather than promoting an enforced mixing. Nonetheless the potential for relationships between those groups to be reconfigured in the house was also present.

I hope that this section has also begun to give a sense of the range of practices which make up the space, from cups of tea and jokes together, to bingo, 'helping out' activities such as pushing wheelchairs,⁵⁶ the production of newsletters and visual displays, as well as more formal meetings and discussions. In order to explore such practices in more detail, I now want to dwell closely on some spaces and times which I

⁵⁶ See Roberts and Devine 2004 for use of term 'helping out' as a way of describing local engagement, rather than more formal definitions of 'volunteering'.

would suggest are typical. In the next two sections I will reflect on time spent at the house with teenagers and then with younger children.

Activities with these two age groups took up a lot of the group's time and energy, and in some ways are at the core of what they do. In what follows I will both describe some specific times and spaces, and draw out the broader issues raised by activities with these age groups.

5.2.3 Teenagers at the community house

The first evening I want to discuss took place about six months into my fieldwork. The group had recently joined an initiative for young people called the 'Dream Scheme'. The scheme was managed day-to-day by the group themselves, although it was overseen on a local area basis by a project officer who worked with a number of groups. Essentially it involved young people getting involved in 'community projects' or voluntary work. For every hour spent doing this, the young people earned points, which they could then 'cash in' to go on trips to theme parks like Alton Towers, or bowling or ice-skating or go-karting, which each 'cost' a certain number of points. In theory, the young people could choose what trips they went on, although in practice the trips tended to be organised by the project officer. She also helped with raising money for the trips and to support the community projects.

Although this scheme seemed somewhat authoritarian to me, it had been very enthusiastically embraced by the young people in Riverlands. A 'youth forum' already existed attached to the main residents' association, with a core of around ten young people aged between 12 and 18. They

also constituted the core of the Dream Scheme, although in total over 34 young people joined the Riverlands scheme. However, at the time of my fieldwork, there seemed to be ongoing issues around what constituted the community work or projects for which they could earn points. Litter-picks and community clean-ups were organised, and some of the young people helped out in the house with younger kids or with elderly people. Nonetheless, this didn't really occupy the teenagers enough to give them a chance to earn all the points they wanted, so activity sessions began to spring up, in negotiation with the young people, which were deemed 'worthwhile' enough to give them points. One of these was a cookery club, with an emphasis on healthy eating, which had been requested by a group of young women.

I had offered to help Sandra with the cookery sessions and when I arrived at the house for the first session she was outside smoking. I was a bit early but no-one had turned up yet. 'I've got no idea how many will come', she said, 'we'll just have to wait and see'. We went inside and started to set things up for the session, and soon about ten 13-16 year-old girls arrived. Some of them were quite dressed up, with make-up and smart clothes; they were on an evening out. The kitchen soon felt crowded and noisy, the girls were chatting and teasing each other, talking about boys and so on. Sandra explained, shouting above all the chatter, that she had decided to abandon the 'healthy' theme this week in favour of making cakes and chocolates for an Easter party at the local old people's home. There was some complaining at this and we began to compile a list of dishes that they wanted to cook at other times. Sandra had brought along

some rice cakes though, and these were shared around whilst she extolled their benefits as compared to bread. I was quite surprised by all this commitment to healthy eating, which I think had begun from a discussion at an organised residential weekend.

Eventually they started to get down to the task of making cakes, biscuits and chocolates, although more young people kept arriving, in little groups of friends. At another cooking session I attended there weren't enough ingredients to go around, and young people were dispatched home to get extra eggs and vegetables and so on, although on this occasion Sandra had brought enough. A small number of boys turned up, as well as some younger girls. Although some of them were not officially on the Dream Scheme, Sandra didn't turn anybody away. There must have been about twenty young people in total. Organising everyone to get involved with very limited space and equipment was difficult, and there was a lot of chatting, joking, messing around and just having fun as well as cooking. I began to realise that the 'community work' aspect of the Dream Scheme was not taken overly seriously, although Sandra was concerned to make sure that everybody contributed something, cajoling those that hung back. She did also fill in the Dream Scheme forms at the end of the session.

Getting all the young people involved meant trying to balance and value the participation of the different little gangs of friends and of individuals. Sandra knew all the young people pretty well and was clearly aware of the dynamics between them. For example, present on this occasion was a girl with quite severe learning difficulties who needed some shielding from

others. Then there was a girl who had a tendency to get loud and aggressive, and would sometimes storm out swearing, although she didn't on this occasion.

The boys present initially seemed hesitant about anything to do with cooking or cleaning, and needed encouragement just to stir the cake mix, although they were then unwilling to let it go once they had got the hang of it. The younger girls present, who were around nine or ten years old, clearly felt quite overwhelmed by the older ones, and stuck together. I asked a girl to come over from one side of the room to the sink and help me wash up, and she brought two friends over with her. There was also some more general tension between the groups of girls (which I became more aware of on later occasions) as well as between the girls and the boys.

Somehow, despite the chaotic atmosphere, fairy cakes were baked and iced and decorated, and chocolate shaped eggs and chicks were made with a chocolate press. There was a sense of achievement as the results were displayed and Sandra made a point of praising everyone's efforts, as she always did. Then it was on to clearing up, filling in the Dream Scheme forms and sorting out future activities, as well as permission slips from parents for a future trip.

The dynamics of this session were typical of others that I took part in. At the outset there was always something of a sense of precariousness and fragility: would anybody turn up? Would those that came 'cause trouble' or

would things go as planned? And was there enough space and equipment to go around? Yet through a shared engagement with practical tasks a sense of momentum and achievement would be generated. This clearly involved negotiations between different individuals and between different groups, separated by friendship circles, age and gender. Such activities also sought to find a balance between constituting spaces of sociability and friendship, and something more formal, where structured achievements could be recognised. As I noted, the 'Dream Scheme' was interpreted by the group in a fairly loose manner, which could be inclusive and productive for the young people, rather than feeling authoritarian.

Although there was a mixture of boys and girls at the cookery sessions, the teenagers' activities, which were organised at their request or in negotiation with them, were often strongly gendered. For example, the teenage girls started taking part in beauty therapy sessions, and various arts-based projects seemed to be more popular with them as well. Nonetheless activities were never formally shut off to either gender, and even during the beauty sessions, boys might come in to see what was happening. One activity which seemed to appeal predominantly to the boys was helping out with an allotment, that the group had taken over as a community project.

I spent a number of Saturday mornings and evenings working with the allotment group, which was headed up by a male committee member, Paul, and consisted of a core of around five or six lads aged between eleven and sixteen. They were generally quieter than the girls, often only

talking to tease one of the others, and it was hard to tell whether they were enjoying themselves, although they were perhaps particularly taciturn in my presence. Yet they would turn up at the agreed meeting times at the community house, and then we would all process down to the allotment (about a half-mile walk) carrying tools. Who got to push the wheelbarrow was a point of honour, Paul told me. He clearly enjoyed the sessions and working with the boys, and he mentioned to me that he had done this kind of thing with his father when he was younger. He grew a lot of vegetables in his garden at home anyway, and this was a chance to share his knowledge and experience.

The sessions at the allotment involved highly physical, sometimes exhausting tasks, especially at the beginning of the summer when we were digging over the ground to clear it of weeds. Paul never told the boys directly what to do ('you can't with this lot', he said), but again encouraged them all to join in, and tried to vary activities between digging and weeding, building a shed, planting and so on. On one occasion a group (including some girls) came down on their bikes and just sat around watching what was going on. 'But they didn't do anything', one of the boys complained, 'Well, that's OK', said Paul, 'you know, maybe they will next time'. Again, such sessions were essentially very informal, although there was also a sense of structured achievement, as the allotment took shape, and different vegetables were planted. Paul, like Sandra, made a point of praising everyone's efforts and highlighting successes.

A desire to give young people confidence, and to value both individual and collective achievements, came out in many conversations and activities with group members. Sandra told me that the best thing for her about being involved with the group was 'seeing people realise that they can achieve things, that look of confidence people get when they think, "I did that"'. For example, she often mentioned what certain young people had achieved: how a very quiet teenage lad had done a presentation at a training course and so on. Sandra and Mick talked about 'confidence', 'empowerment' and 'raising aspirations' as what the group were aiming for.

Such terms probably reflected their involvement in training schemes and official discussions about working with young people. Phrases like 'raising aspirations' clearly resonate with the discourses around community development and public participation used by local workers which I discussed in Chapter Three. However, perhaps unlike some official approaches to 'community participation', the group displayed a genuine willingness to give young people some control over the nature of such participation and the spaces in which it took place. Indeed there was an understanding that this was crucial if young people were to be successfully engaged. The upstairs 'Chill Out Zone' at the house gave them their own territory and a degree of autonomy. The youth forum were encouraged to come up with their own projects and to represent their own views at meetings or public events. For example when they started working on an arts project, they interviewed a number of artists before choosing one they wanted to work with. This attitude to teenagers was picked up on by other

local initiatives and projects, who often cited the house as a good example of such work with young people.

However, working with the young people was clearly not easy, and as already mentioned there was often a sense of precariousness around sessions with them, as if things might spiral out of control. On evenings at the house there sometimes just seemed to be too many of them around. Tensions and rows between individuals and factions could erupt at any time, and Sandra would disappear upstairs to the Chill Out room to sort out 'trouble', and this would be followed by a lot of shouting. Mick talked about a few individuals as 'trouble-makers', although he also said that they could usually resolve problems themselves. Nonetheless, eventually the group moved to restrict the numbers of teenagers who could be in at any one time, and which evenings of the week they could come in. They also put restrictions around who could come in depending on where they lived, essentially restricting it to the Riverlands area. A sign was displayed on the door with a list of streets from which they welcomed young people. A community development worker, who was generally very supportive of the group, pointed out to me that they were being exclusionary in putting the sign up: 'everyone thinks they're so wonderful locally but look at that sign, even they're not inclusive, they're cliquey'.

Sandra said to me that they didn't like excluding people but that it had become too much. 'There just seemed to be legs everywhere, and the little ones started feeling intimidated'. The group began to feel aware of the limitations of what they could offer, 'there's only so much we can do,

we're not trained youth workers', said Mick. Indeed it seemed that many of the committee members were not confident about working with teenagers, so they had a problem having enough volunteers to run activities. Therefore the group began lobbying the council for a 'proper youth club' in the area, which involved an extremely protracted set of negotiations around moving and setting up a Portakabin (which had been used for SRB workers on East Town) and employing workers to run it.

At the time of officially finishing my fieldwork these negotiations were still ongoing.⁵⁷ Part of the issue seemed to be Sandra and Mick's strong feelings that they wanted a 'community-led youth club' rather than a model imposed by the council, so this issue brought to a head tensions around degrees of official involvement with the group's spaces. Sandra and Mick felt that the young people might not feel so comfortable in a more formal setting, and they also complained that council youth workers were not necessarily good at relating to them (this despite their own lack of confidence about not being properly qualified workers). Rather Sandra wanted something in between; she said that she wanted them to 'grow their own youth leaders'. In fact some of the older young people had begun to take on a leadership role in relation to younger ones and children, and some of them were talking about a career in youth work or something 'caring'.

⁵⁷ Although the new youth club, run by youth workers from both outside the area and within it, finally opened in September 2005, after two years of discussions. When I visited the group after the club had been open around a month, over sixty young people had already used it. The new club was able to offer services to young people from a wider local area, including those from East Town.

In developing spaces where young people could express themselves, and achieve both individually and collectively, the group therefore recognised that there was a need for structured mechanisms of support, but also that this had to be on the young people's terms, and that too much official involvement would stifle such goals. Indeed whilst the kinds of spaces I have written about in this section may seem very straightforward – spaces of cooking, gardening, and just socialising, they actually involved a complex series of negotiations for the group, worked through in particular ways via such practical tasks. As I have shown, these negotiations included balancing the needs of individuals and of different groups, of developing spaces of both sociability and achievement, and of involving local authorities and agencies in ways which supported rather than quashed young people's involvement.

Such negotiations were of course undertaken by the young people themselves as much as the adult group members, and I want to underline the degree of autonomy they exercised over the spaces and times of their involvement.⁵⁸ These spaces enabled interaction and collective action whilst also feeling 'comfortable' for the young people. Sandra told me that one of the young women who had been involved with the young person's forum, and was now joining a training scheme, had said to her that she didn't realise until afterwards what she had gained from her involvement with the group. Sandra said, 'you know, they just got on with it, they didn't think about what they were doing, it's not until you sit down with them and

⁵⁸ For example, when I attended a beauty therapy session with a group of teenage girls it was the girls who opened up the house (although Sandra was around next door), set it up for the session, and organised music and snacks before the beauty worker arrived.

talk about it that they realise what they've gained, all that of experience and confidence'. Indeed whilst there were times when things felt difficult, there is no doubt that the involvement of young people with the Riverlands group represented an important success, especially given the kinds of very negative views of young people which circulated locally. Since the activities of the house got underway reportings to the police of 'anti-social behaviour' in the neighbourhood have apparently dropped significantly.

5.2.3 Children at the community house

Similar dynamics were apparent in the group's work with younger children, which also aimed to generate interaction and senses of achievement, both for the children themselves and the volunteers who worked with them. A weekly 'under-13s' evening session took place on Friday nights for some of the time I was doing the fieldwork, and I went along on a number of occasions. One particular session, when Sandra and Mick were on holiday, was run by another committee member, Maureen, her fifteen year-old daughter Kerry (who was part of the core of teenagers involved there), as well as three regular volunteers; Martin and Karen (a young couple) and Jean, whose grandchildren were at the session. Karen's little daughter was also there as a participant, and there seemed to be numerous other family connections among those present, across three generations. The presence of teenagers like Kerry as volunteers was a regular feature of such sessions, and indeed 'helping out' in this way seemed to be a popular activity among the young people.

When I arrived at the house, the volunteers were setting everything up for the session. I had worked alongside Jean at another cooking session for teenagers, a couple of months previously, and she had seemed rather unsure of herself and flustered by organising everyone. Now, though, she seemed more confident, and had brought along a big bag of equipment to make cakes, which was one of the activities on offer for the kids. Karen set up spider-painting (with straws) in the front room and biscuit decorating at the other end of the kitchen.

Before the session had officially started there were kids queuing up outside to come in, and as soon as the doors were opened a gang of little boys arrived (all aged around six or seven) who began to zoom around the front room in a manic fashion. Martin came in and started to play with them, and calm some of them down. Again he seemed to know most of them, and there was at least one boy with behavioural difficulties, which Martin was clearly aware of. More and more kids arrived, around 25 in total, and the whole place soon became a whirlwind of children. The limitations of both the size of the rooms in the house and the equipment could feel very pressing on these occasions. Despite the chaos the volunteers got on with organising the session, with Karen taking a leading role. She went around consulting all the children about what activities they wanted to do, and making lists to ensure that they would each get a chance to do what they wanted, which became increasingly complicated as they started changing their minds and so on.

Once the activities actually got under way the children began to calm down and concentrate on the activities. There was not a very strict adherence to the specified tasks, with some of the children doing other paintings or finding other crafts materials in the cupboard. The volunteers were also doing paintings and decorating biscuits. Concentrating on these tasks seemed to make them more relaxed, and the atmosphere gradually became less fraught. They were pleased with how things were going. Jean seemed buoyed up by the session. She had a lot of health problems (she was in a wheelchair for some of the time I was around) and had been at the hospital all day. She told me that she was already exhausted, had hardly had time to turn round. Nonetheless she seemed glad to be there. 'A lot of these kids, you see they don't really get this at home', she told me.

Over the two hours countless small dramas were somehow navigated and negotiated; children who had lost their money, couldn't stop crying or wanted to go home. When they did all leave they had created an incredible mess, including bits of coloured paper all over the floor, cake mixture splattered on the tables and so on. On another occasion I remember Sandra talking to me about how messy the house got with the children's sessions, in response to some criticisms they'd had from council art workers (whom I will discuss below). 'But the mess doesn't bother us', she said, 'we don't mind clearing up, it's worth it'. Again she said that some of the children didn't get to do that kind of thing at home. Overall the kids were encouraged to be creative and expressive at these sessions, and their achievements were valued within the house, with paintings and

crafts put out on display. Sandra and Mick sometimes showed me things that kids had made recently, 'Look, isn't that beautiful', and so on.

As well as the sessions at the community house, a strong commitment to play for children was extended by the group into other local spaces. A project that was nearing completion when I started the fieldwork was a new play area for kids, on a patch of green space at the edge of the estate (see also discussion in Chapter Six). The group had campaigned for the play area and then worked with the council play services to find the funding and decide on the layout and choice of equipment. The youth forum had been centrally involved in choosing the adventure play equipment for older children and for an adjacent sports kick-about area. These facilities were extremely well-used, and seemed to be viewed by the group as an extension of their facilities at the community house. Several committee members told me that they 'kept an eye' on things there, tried to sort out any trouble. Also, over the summer, council play workers came and ran organised play sessions on the site, for younger children, with older children joining in as volunteer playworkers.

Similar sessions, but indoor this time, were also run in the hall at the local school. The 'play scheme' as it was called, was again partly seen by the group as an extension of their activities, with local volunteers (many of them teenagers) working alongside council play workers. The sessions tended to have a theme decided by the playworkers, such as 'jungle' or 'space' with lots of materials provided to do pictures and make things, as well as having physical outdoor-type games and activities on offer in an

adjacent hall or in the playground. Parents came along with younger children, so the sessions were also a chance for them to see each other and have a break from childcare on their own. Joining in the activities could be fun for the adults too, and when I went along there were a couple of mothers who would sit together and make ambitious collages or models whilst their kids did other things.

Many of these sessions therefore included degrees of official involvement in the form of professional workers who would structure some of the activities. In particular, several months after the under-13s session described, arts workers from the council started to come along, in theory to run these sessions, although local volunteers continued to be in attendance. On an evening when I was there their role was actually fairly minimal. They turned up late, and by the time they arrived Sandra and Karen had already got out glitter, coloured feathers, glue and paper to give the children something to do. Again there were lots of children and an atmosphere of general chaos. The arts group had brought along flower pots and cardboard jewellery boxes for the children to paint. They seemed to have fairly set ideas about how these should be done. However, as soon as the materials hit the tables, many of the children started doing other things with them. Boxes were stuck together to make towers and flower pots decorated with feathers. In the end the arts workers hung back in the kitchen whilst the volunteers worked alongside the kids.

Sandra told me that generally the arts workers weren't very happy with the sessions, 'too many kids, and too unstructured', and she wasn't sure whether the arrangement would continue. I sensed that the workers weren't happy with the loose way in which prescribed activities were interpreted.⁵⁹ At the time we were discussing this we were waiting for the arts workers to turn up for a different session, at which they never arrived. Sandra was getting increasingly frustrated, 'we should just do things ourselves', she said, 'we've done things perfectly well by ourselves before, and it's the only way we know we're going to get something done'. As with the activities with teenagers, such dynamics reflect the difficulties for the group of balancing official involvement with activities with their own aims and ways of working.

In my discussions of sessions with teenagers and children in the previous sections I have tried to give a more detailed sense of the kinds dynamics at work in the spaces of the Riverlands group. I don't want to give the impression that they didn't encounter problems, or make mistakes, but here my intention has been to concentrate on the positive potentials generated by their spaces, and to show the ways in which they constitute forms of public space. These include potentials for interactions and negotiations between individuals and between groups, partly framed by caring or 'helping out' relationships, such as grandparents and teenagers helping with the small children's activities. The spaces provided opportunities both for having fun and being sociable, and for more

⁵⁹ Indeed Fiona Smith and John Barker (2000), in their research on after-school play clubs, describe similar dynamics where children resist attempts to structure their play in certain ways, for example by ignoring 'themes' prescribed by the play workers.

structured personal and collective achievements. Such interactions and achievements always took place against negotiations around degrees of official control and autonomy for the group, around the formality or informality of their activities.

I have concentrated here on discussing spaces which were structured around shared material and practical activities, because these seemed to me central to the group's successes, and to the kinds of opportunities and potentials discussed above. As already noted, more discursive or symbolic modes of making spaces were also present, and for example the youth forum held formal 'meetings' as well as the main committee. Indeed the youth forum was also involved in various 'community arts' projects whilst I was undertaking fieldwork, which essentially involved them producing structured representations of themselves and their views, including a CD-Rom about the community house and drama workshops around issues of racism and prejudice. However, whilst these were undoubtedly valued by the young people as achievements (although also sometimes complained about as 'boring' along the way) I felt that the more everyday spaces of the community house underpinned their ongoing participation and involvement.

For both participants and volunteers, doing practical activities generated fun, new friendships and connections, and senses of achievement.

Activities like stirring a cake mix together, or kneeling around a table with small children to stick sequins on a box, involved unavoidably tactile engagements, both with others and with the equipment or materials. They

also generated small, but often significant achievements, seeing the final cakes baked or the finished boxes. As I hope I have shown, such achievements need to be understood within the context of the difficulties of holding such spaces together. These spaces were always fragile and precarious, threatened by disruptive children, volunteers not turning up, equipment breaking and so on. Yet it was also such precarious qualities that produced emergent connections and potentials for further action. When a session had gone well, new ideas would be generated for other sessions, and volunteers or participants who hadn't been before might decide to come again.

Such material and embodied activities also enabled skills like cooking, gardening and small-scale crafts projects, often associated with domestic or private spheres, to be shared collectively with others locally. For example, Paul, who led the allotment sessions, often talked to the boys about gardening techniques and tips that he had accumulated over many years. He sometimes referred to his childhood and to his own family life during the sessions, for example on one occasion when we were constructing a shed, he recalled building a shed with his own father. Similarly, Mick told me that Sandra had always organised activities for children locally, 'years ago, when our kids were little, half the kids on the street, she would take them on adventures, so we always had lots of kids around'. In such ways, private lives could contribute to new senses of the public. Indeed I will return to pulling together more explicitly the ways in which the work of both groups produced new kinds of public space in the

final part of this chapter, after considering the spaces of the Westfields group.

5.3 Westfields

5.3.1 The New Beginnings Centre and the Community Hall

This part of the chapter will follow the same structure as my discussion of the Riverlands group; I will begin by setting out some basic information about the buildings where the Westfields group are based, and their committee and structure. I will then go on to make some general points about the ways in which their spaces are negotiated, and finally provide more detailed ethnographic accounts of particular activities.

The Westfields residents' association, like Riverlands, work within a broad remit of improving local residents' lives,⁶⁰ and this is reflected in the range of activities locally. They have two buildings which they operate from, although their main 'base', like Riverlands, is a house given to them rent-free by the council. 'The New Beginnings Centre', apparently named by one of the committee members, is a bungalow in a short street of bungalows, which are lived in mostly by the elderly. The community hall is just down the road from the centre, on the same street. As already discussed, the location of their buildings restricts their activities quite

⁶⁰ The stated aims on the group's constitution run as follows:

- To provide benefits for residents in the area of benefit without distinction of age, sex, sexuality, race, colour, family responsibilities, or political, religious or other opinion
- To improve the quality of life for the community, particularly those at greatest disadvantage
- To encourage community spirit
- To monitor plans and developments which affect the local area and liaise with the local council and other bodies to represent the local community.

significantly in that it is a condition of their lease that teenagers are not allowed inside, although in fact older teenagers are actively involved in the group in various ways.

As with the Riverlands group, Westfields were clearly dependent on the local authority in very material ways. They did get support from, and have good relationships with, a number of service providers, especially the local area housing officer and the community police. 'We're seen as reliable', Sylvia told me. As previously mentioned, one of the local community police officers (who described the area and local people to me in extremely negative terms generally) said that the residents' association were 'a godsend' as far as he was concerned. Clearly, as discussed in relation to Riverlands, the group could help officials to achieve their aims for the estate.

The Westfields bungalow consists of two fairly small rooms, with a galley kitchen. One room, the smaller of the two, acts as an office and is filled with files and papers, with three desks and chairs and two computers. The walls are decorated with photos and certificates as well as a mural of cartoon animals. The other room has six or seven computers in it and a large table and chairs. It is predominantly used by the 'College in the Community', a further education provider which works with the group to put on courses for local people, predominantly around IT skills. Like Riverlands they also ran advice sessions through Citizens Advice Bureau and Age Concern. The kitchen is mostly a place for making cups of tea and coffee.

The community hall down the road from the bungalow is used half the time by a day care centre for the elderly, so this again limits what the group can do there and when. When it is available they run a weekly programme there, consisting partly of further 'College in the Community' courses, such as yoga and line-dancing, and partly other activities, including an 'Ageing Well' group (run jointly with Age Concern) and a twice-weekly kids club. The group also use the hall for their 'open meetings' with residents and for one-off functions and events.

Further activities take place in other locations locally, including the area of green space called The Millpond, and the local secondary school.

Westfields, like Riverlands, ran a 'Dream Scheme' for children, although they put an age limit of 13 on participation because of their difficulties with working with teenagers. The scheme seemed to be rather less intense than on Riverlands, and basically involved occasional sessions of young people doing either community clean-ups, or gardening for older residents. Even for this there were apparently many elderly residents who didn't want young people in their gardens.

5.3.2 The committee and volunteers

There are around ten committee members in the Westfields group, as well as a network of volunteers. Only one of the committee members is a man, the father of one of the other members. There were sometimes other male volunteers around, although they tended to be there to do something specific, for example driving around to pick-up the elderly residents who

were coming to the Christmas party. I asked group members for their views on the lack of men in the group on a number of occasions. They generally said that they wanted more men involved, but that it hadn't seemed to work out. Sylvia, the group secretary said to me, 'I'm not a feminist but I have to say that men just never get involved in this kind of thing'. She told me that her husband wouldn't do anything linked to the group. Pat, the vice chair said more sympathetically that she wondered whether men felt intimidated about joining in because it was all women at present.⁶¹ Jill suggested some other reasons during a taped discussion:

The men have come and gone but what we've found is that sometimes people have joined for a hidden agenda, something particular they've wanted to achieve and then they've moved on. But it's not for want of trying, I mean we don't want to exclude men, then again a lot of men work and don't have time.

From my fieldwork observations I saw that group did indeed make attempts to involve men and did not have a conscious strategy of excluding them. For example, Jill was keen to work on a joint project with a local 'Dad's group', which had been set up through Sure Start. Nonetheless the female-dominated nature of the group did set up certain gendered dynamics, which came into focus at particular moments, and might lead to men feeling excluded. I will draw attention to some of these moments in the rest of this chapter. This does not necessarily mean that I

⁶¹ When I asked the Riverlands group how it was that they had a mix of men and women involved, Sandra and Mick said that because it had initially been the two of them from the start, this had made it easier for men to feel included. A number of other couples were involved with the Riverlands group, which suggests ways in which their work is linked to domestic or private lives, if not to an exclusively female sphere.

would categorise their whole project as a 'feminine' one, as discussed in Chapter One.

However, as Jill's comment suggests, the women's positions in relation to both the domestic sphere and a more 'public' world of paid employment did perhaps affect the particular nature of the spaces of their activities. In fact, none of the committee were in employment whilst I was doing the fieldwork, although one of the younger members spent some time training as a community development worker. Some of them, including Jill, had worked previously, and she commented that it was since stopping work (she had had an accident) that she had become more concerned with local issues:

When you're working, you don't take so much notice of what's going on in your area, when you're at home like we are now you do, you see it all the time.

Instead nearly all of the committee members were actively involved in childcare, either as parents or grandparents. As Pat said, they'd all had kids, 'now we've got them again haven't we?', meaning the grandchildren that some of them spent much of their time with. These childcaring roles seemed to be strongly linked to their work with the group, firstly on a straightforward level in that their children tended to join in with the group's activities that were aimed at children or young people. On a broader level, I think it affected their motivation and approach as a group, particularly in relation to the ongoing tensions locally around young people. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the group worked to defend young people

when the subject came up in discussions locally, and analysed problems with young people in terms of them being bored, or not having enough to do.

Indeed, group members tended to talk about a concern for local young people as their original motivation for becoming involved with the group, and while they described their overall purposes in broad terms around improving the lives of local people, concern for young people seemed to be central to their aims. From this, involvement in other issues might develop. Jill told me:

I originally got involved because I was just so sick of the kids on the estate having nothing, then it just grew from that. I mean we care about every resident on the estate, not just kids, but at that time there were issues, well there still are issues with kids. Now we get through to the parents through the children. Most volunteers started off getting involved with activities with the kids.⁶²

Such a sense of resources, skills and concerns from the group members private or domestic lives being brought into a public and collective arena was therefore present within the work of the Westfields group. I shall develop this theme of the relationship between public and private spheres of action in the description and analysis that follows.

⁶² However it is worth noting that this was not true for all volunteers. For example, one of the committee members, who was also a mother with grown up children, told me that she felt intimidated by the young people in the area, and didn't really like working with children; she preferred volunteering with older people.

5.3.3 Negotiations and tensions

Therefore, on an everyday level, there was a strong network of family relationships around the group, probably more so than at Riverlands, although there were also key families who were involved there. Aside from the father and daughter already mentioned, there was also a mother and daughter who were both committee members, and the volunteers tended to be related to others involved. Small children and babies were frequently present at meetings and events, either being handed round or running about. So family relationships affected the way the group worked together in various ways. As already noted, such relations seemed to provide much of the fundamental impetus behind the group. Nonetheless, they could create antagonisms between group members at times. Jill once said to me that she wished that less of the volunteers who worked with children were parents, because it caused problems when their kids got into conflicts with other kids. There also seemed to be, as on Riverlands, some extended families who were seen as 'problems' or who were in long-running conflicts with other families.

Jill's concern about the relationship between family life and the life of the group was linked to other, broader concerns about wanting the group to be run in a more 'professional' way, whilst remaining anchored in informal ways of working and relating to each other. This again can be thought of as a tension between public and private spheres of activity. Another specific source of tension was a sense of volunteers or committee members not 'pulling their weight' in relation to the others. There was a rota for who came into the building at different times, and besides this a

number of committee members had specific roles. For example a younger committee member called Claire ran the Dream Scheme, and other members had formalised roles such as Treasurer and Secretary. Nonetheless, some people inevitably worked harder than others. There were times when some committee members didn't seem to be turning up for meetings or at events, and this caused resentment.

At one stage, near the beginning of my fieldwork, one of the committee members was asked to leave because she had been stirring up problems and bitterness towards other group members. 'The atmosphere in here had changed', said Jill, 'people started commenting that it didn't feel so friendly'. There was some discussion at this stage about putting more formal systems in place around working practices, but it was hard to compel volunteers to work in certain ways. It is worth noting that during the time I spent with the group they were facing particular difficulties and frustration with their plans for a new building, and I think that this caused increased tension between them and created low morale at times.

Nevertheless, in the New Beginnings Centre a tension between the space being essentially an office or business environment and perhaps a friend's living room was a constant issue, particularly for Jill.⁶³ The centre was open every weekday morning and some afternoons and Saturdays as well. When open, the centre is staffed by two volunteers at all times. College courses often take place in the larger room, whilst the other room operates as an office but also general drop-in area. At times it did seem to

⁶³ As it was for myself as a volunteer: see discussion in Chapter Two.

primarily function as a work area, with people answering phones, filling in forms, writing letters and so on. However at other times it was much more of a social space, where people dropped in and out for cups of tea, often with small children in tow. Whoever was in, there never seemed to be enough room, and passing visitors tended to lean on desks or sit on the floor. When the whole committee was present for one of their monthly meetings it was hard to get into the room, let alone sit down anywhere. Indeed, people working there often complained about not having enough time or quiet to get on with administrative things. Karen said during a discussion session, 'you can't work here, we have to take work home'. On the other hand, spending time sitting around and sharing news was very much part of the way the space worked, and if someone dropped in they tended to stay for at least half an hour. Karen also said that it was important that the space was 'comfortable, somewhere where people feel at home'.

During a discussion session which I ran, at the group's request, to talk about planning their future, I made a comment about them not being a business, 'But we are a business', said Jill, 'At least we should act like one'. Jill's concern seemed to stem partly from wanting the group to have a stability outside of her own input and role. Like Sandra at Riverlands, she was certainly the driving force behind the group, but her husband was not involved in the way Mick was, and she also suffered from multiple health problems which meant that some weeks she couldn't do anything. She therefore struggled to set up the buildings with the systems and procedures of a work-like environment. Part of this was initiating a

process called 'Quality First', which was a kind of organisational development process which led to a kite-mark for community groups. Sessions were run by a trainer at the bungalow to go through procedures like developing their mission statement or equal opportunities policy.

This process was highly unpopular with the group members who moaned about upcoming sessions. Even Jill admitted that it was just about filling in forms and ticking boxes, but she nonetheless pushed it forward. She had her own ambivalences about management and bureaucracy, 'I came here to do hands-on stuff with people in the community and I can't do that anymore', she once said. As mentioned elsewhere, she was also in the process of attending courses in voluntary sector management at Staffordshire University, and this had helped her 'think more long term, think about the future'. Nonetheless it was somehow difficult for them to move forward in the way that she wanted them to. For example, they had applied for and been given some funding to employ someone professionally to help run the buildings, but this just seemed like too big a step. Jill felt daunted by the idea, despite saying that it was really needed. More generally, they didn't necessarily have the power or resources to develop the organisation within a business development model.

The others in the group seemed far less conscious of, or concerned by, organisational and managerial challenges, and I think they saw their involvement as something much more informal or personal. When I asked the whole group to come up with words or phrases to describe the residents' association they said things like 'caring', 'friendly' and 'a

listening ear'. The main focus of the group's work, after all, was organising social activities and events for people to meet and enjoy themselves together. As I have already noted, this was linked to a domestic or private sphere of family relationships and friends.

In fact, the whole group (including Jill) saw their informality as a very positive thing in lots of ways. 'We get through to people', Pat, one of the committee members said, 'as a residents' association we get through to people that professionals can't get through to'. However, alongside this they also had ongoing concerns that they weren't involving enough residents in their work. For example, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, people living in parts of the estate furthest away from the bungalow didn't tend to come along to things or get involved. Most people got involved with the group through 'word of mouth' although there was always discussion of the need for more formal and perhaps conventionally 'public' mechanisms, such as the newsletter I mentioned in Chapter Two.

As at Riverlands, then, there was the possibility that the informality and intimacy of their group excluded those who didn't fit into their networks. This can be understood as a tension between being a representative and accountable public organisation, and a more private one of family and friends. However, I should point out that the committee members did not all know each other prior to becoming involved. Indeed one of the families who was involved was seen as quite notorious locally, although I don't know what the specific reasons were. One of the committee members was once complaining to Jill about this family, 'you know what they're like',

she said. Jill said yes, she did know what they were like, and that's why she was glad they were involved with the group.

Therefore, I want to suggest, as I did in relation to the Riverlands' group, that such senses of continuity between formality and informality, or between public and private, were what ultimately enabled the group to be successful locally. The group's spaces both connected with people's individual lives and concerns, and drew them into wider realms of interaction and achievement. This was one of the characteristics of their particular version of 'public space'. Nonetheless, this balance was clearly difficult, and in this section I have tried to set out some of the overall issues that the group negotiated on a daily basis. Whilst holding onto connections to the informality of private or domestic lives, the group also needed to maintain and develop itself as an organisation, and to be inclusive to residents from across the estate. In the next three sections I am going to focus more closely on the particular spaces of the Westfields group, and the kinds of practices which enabled such negotiations.

5.3.4 Conversations at the New Beginnings Centre

Unlike the set-up at the Riverlands community house, the Westfields group have a clearer dividing line between their 'office' time (although as I have discussed residents could drop in at any time) and times when they run particular activity sessions, which often take place at the community hall. In order to give a clearer sense of this 'office time', the next section will draw on time spent working with the group at the New Beginnings Centre.

As already mentioned, volunteers often complained about not getting enough quiet in the bungalow to get on with some of the work. It was true that there was a constant stream of conversation, and at times the atmosphere was fairly 'manic', as they themselves described it. The women tended to joke around and tease each other quite a lot. They talked both about the work of the group, and about issues in the rest of their lives.

The activities and conversation topics from one afternoon I spent at the New Beginnings Centre were typical. I had volunteered to help with some office-based work, and Jill had asked me to get together the text for a newsletter, as discussed in Chapter Two. Karen, the group's treasurer, Pat, the vice-chair, and Jill were around in the office. Next door there was a group of young women doing an IT course, including Claire, another committee member. Pat and Karen were organising tickets and things for a trip to Blackpool, which they organised every year. It was very popular apparently, they never needed to market it, the tickets just went.

There was a lot of giggling and banter coming from the IT room, and Claire came out a couple of times to get a break from it. She helped me with the desktop publishing package I was trying to use; she'd done a course on that before. Once the course was over she and a couple of other women who had been taking part in it came into the office for a sit down and a chat. The group had been away together on a residential course over the weekend, and there was some gossip, someone had been flirting with

someone else. This led on to a fairly raucous conversation about sex and marriage, having children and looking after adolescent boys. Besides all the jokes here were some serious concerns being touched on, which being with the other women enabled them to discuss. Indeed, I don't think that the conversation would have taken place in the same way if men had been around, so this was one of those moments when a sense of gendered interaction came into focus. As I suggested in relation to territory for young people, spaces in which the women could express their particular concerns undoubtedly also fulfilled an important role for them.

The conversation changed when a worker from College in the Community came in, initially to discuss her worries about low recruitment on a couple of the courses. This led on to a discussion about why people locally wouldn't attend courses in other venues. She felt that people lacked confidence about going outside the immediate local area, or going to more formal educational venues, and the women seemed to agree. They began to talk about experiences of accessing other services like doctors and dentists, and the difficulties of getting NHS dental treatment. This led on to some broader discussion of benefits, tax credits and so on, on which many of the women depended.

Pat had been out at the butcher's shop getting sandwiches for lunch and when she came back in she started to ask me about London. She'd been there a few times, but lots of other people locally had never been.

Wouldn't it be good to organise a trip for young people next summer? This

started a discussion about the logistics of this idea, how difficult it would be to control the kids, where you could take them and so on.

As this short description has emphasised, conversations would range very freely between personal or private issues and more official matters relating to the group. This was also the case at the monthly committee meetings, although they were more formally organised with someone chairing, taking minutes, an agenda and so on. The meetings tended to focus on planning events and discussing problems and issues that had arisen in relation to their activities. Sometimes there were quite heated discussions, for example about how much work somebody was having to do, and why hadn't so-and-so been involved. However, the conversation could quickly become less focused on the group, especially when there were babies being handed around or small children running in and out. Therefore even more formally discursively structured spaces were still strongly tied to everyday and domestic relationships and practices.

This kind of ongoing talk at the centre meant that the space was both sociable and family centred, a place to talk about individual concerns, as well as being outwardly focused on the life of the group and its wider purposes within the neighbourhood. Indeed, despite the informality, there were some quite clear ideas around about its purposes as a space. I have already mentioned that the idea of somewhere where people felt 'comfortable' was understood as especially important. Also, as at Riverlands, there was an emphasis on personal development and confidence-building, although they didn't talk about this using quite the

same phrases. Here such an emphasis was particularly focused on volunteers and committee members. Jill always tried to encourage others to take on leadership roles, for example getting them to speak out at meetings or forums, and chair other committees and groups linked to the residents' association. She told me on our first meeting:

I've banned certain words in the building, "thick", "can't" and so on.

Now if I say "I'm thick", I get my wrist slapped, it's right, we can't put ourselves down, we've got to be positive.

During the same discussion, she spoke about some of the personal problems and issues experienced by those in the group, literacy and learning difficulties, health problems, depression and so on. Indeed, whilst I didn't push this as a line of questioning, I realised that group members were often living in difficult domestic circumstances, and mental health problems seemed to be a particular issue. One of the volunteers suffered from agoraphobia, and she told me about how others had helped her, walking with her to the building, setting up meetings and rooms so that she felt ok, and being understanding when she didn't feel up to coming in. Similarly, Pat told me how little confidence she had had when she first became a volunteer, 'wouldn't even answer the phone'. Now she felt more confident, 'mind you, I still get a bit "thingy"'. Jill, who was also present at this conversation said to me, 'Pat's so good at making people feel welcome, feel comfortable, not everyone can do that, can they?' In such ways, the centre was a place where skills and achievements were valued that might be overlooked in other more formal settings, and might be taken

for granted in the women's domestic lives. Jill told me that it had taken her a lot of persuading to get some of the group members involved.

Another committee member, who was 18 years old, had had lots of emotional problems when she first started coming along two years previously. Jill had spent a lot of time with her, 'She had a big chip on her shoulder, not a very nice person to know, and always in trouble'. It emerged that she had learning difficulties and through time spent with the group she had calmed down, become a committee member, and eventually got a training position through a council scheme to train up community development workers. In fact her story was promoted by the council as a success story, and covered in the regeneration press. Perhaps it didn't quite unfold as depicted in the press, because she had a baby whilst I was doing the fieldwork. Nonetheless Jill and others felt that her life had changed in lots of positive ways through her involvement with the group; Jill said to me, 'I'm so pleased with what she did'.

Aside from these issues of personal development, the New Beginnings Centre could also function as a place of collective campaigning and of action on behalf of the wider neighbourhood. The women often talked about themselves as 'fighters'. Jill once said to me 'I'm at my best when I've got my back against the wall, when I've got my teeth stuck into something'. The centre was the place where the women discussed tactics and strategies, arranged meetings and made decisions. Over the years they had had many 'battles' with the council, for example campaigning for a road crossing outside the shopping centre. This had taken two years,

during which time they had collected evidence of how dangerous the road was, got together a petition, and planned a sit-in, 'although it never actually got to that point'. As discussed, the group were having a difficult year during the time I spent with them, but they seemed to get through this collectively by referring to this sense of fighting, 'We just have to keep picking ourselves up and carrying on'.

The interactions between the group members at the bungalow clearly enabled them to sustain this outlook. This section has aimed to show how their conversations and encounters worked to produce a particular kind of space, in which a range of personal, family-centred and wider neighbourhood issues could be explored, and both individual and collective achievements celebrated. Although at times the centre did feel very much like a family front room, the space was nonetheless experienced as separate from the group members' domestic lives in significant ways.

When Pat was talking to me about having little confidence before she started coming to the centre she explained it by saying, 'I'd been out of circulation that long', which I took to mean that she'd been at home, away from collective interaction. This comment suggests the differences between her private life and the more public interactions and achievements at the centre, alongside the continuities that I have demonstrated. Indeed it is important to emphasise here that the group's spaces were not simply extensions of their private lives, but could present quite significant new spheres of achievement, even if answering a phone

or writing a formal letter might not appear as such. In the next two sections I will discuss other kinds of spaces produced by the groups where similar negotiations took place, and which therefore constituted particular versions of public spaces.

5.3.5 Open meetings at the community hall

Although as I have said, residents could 'drop in' to the bungalow at any time, the Westfields group make more formal attempts to get in touch with local people through quarterly 'open meetings' in the community hall.

Although these are obviously not an 'everyday' occurrence, they did seem to come around fairly regularly when I was doing the fieldwork, and felt like an ongoing part of what the group did. The group also held occasional extra meetings to discuss urgent issues, and I have included a discussion of one of these in the following chapter. The open meetings had a more conventionally 'public' feel than the group's other activities, and in what follows I will try to give a sense of their particular dynamics, before drawing out some broader points about their potentials and values as spaces.

The meetings were structured by more formal discursive conventions than discussions at the community house, and the committee members adopted a more formal way of speaking and interacting, and were generally quieter. The meetings took place on weekday evenings, starting at 7pm. The hall would be set up with a long 'top table' at which all the committee members sat. Other residents sat on rows of chairs facing them, forming a kind of 'audience'. I think the idea behind this was to make the residents' association visible, to show people who was involved

and who they could get help from, rather than trying to create a distance. However, I always felt a bit uncomfortable with this arrangement, as it seemed to very much divide the committee from other residents. In fact sometimes committee members would start off sitting in the audience, perhaps feeling the same, and Jill would have to try and persuade them to come and sit up at the front.

According to the group's accounts of what they were used to, the open meetings I went to were not particularly well attended. Discussions of this issue formed part of ongoing concerns about whether the group was involving local people enough or communicating with them effectively. At the meetings I went to there were probably 15-20 residents present at each, as well as the committee members and various guests who spoke around particular agenda items. The residents that did come seemed to be predominantly older, although there tended to children there as well, who were often running around and playing at the back. 'We have an open door policy', Jill told me. Apparently the previous chair of the group (when it was run as a much more minimal organisation, without the bungalow) wouldn't let kids come to meetings.

The meetings had agendas which would run to approximately fifteen items. Some of these were procedural issues like 'apologies', 'minutes of previous meeting', 'date of next meeting' and so on. There were also always updates from committee members about their different areas of activity, for example from Claire, who ran the Dream Scheme and Pat who ran the Ageing Well group. Other than that more substantial items tended

to be 'guest speakers' who were usually council or other agency officials talking about initiatives of relevance to the area. These ranged from the local 'dog warden' talking about responsible dog ownership, a representative from the council explaining an upcoming ballot on transfer of housing stock, to someone from Age Concern talking about changes to pensioners benefits. A slot was also given over in theory to the local area 'community facilitator' (see previous chapter) although in practice she rarely attended. Finally, 'Any Other Business' tended to involve quite a substantial discussion, usually around concerns over young people and 'anti-social behaviour'. Overall the meetings lasted about two and a half hours.

First and foremost, I think the group saw the meetings as a chance to generate wider involvement in their activities and issues of concern. As already mentioned, the group felt aware of the fact that there were still many residents on the estate who didn't know about their existence, let alone what they did. Throughout, Jill, who chaired the meetings, would emphasise that they wanted more people to access their services, or to come to them with new ideas for things which should happen on the estate. Aside from telling them about what was already happening she would say things like, 'If anyone wants to put on new activities, we'll support them to make them happen'. In this sense they were keen to promote an active involvement from other residents, rather than being seen as another service provider, which was a danger for the group. Jill told me that when they first moved into the bungalow local people thought

that they were something to do with the council, and would come in to complain about getting their windows fixed and so on.

Obviously inviting the 'guest speakers' was part of trying to make people more informed about local issues and also more demanding of service providers. As discussed in the previous chapter, some officials found it hard to talk to local people in a straightforward but non-patronising way, or indeed would deliberately make vague statements or hold back information. Yet at these meetings, unlike perhaps at the community forums, it was generally clear that the speakers had been invited into the group's space, on the residents' terms. Jill and other committee members, particularly Sylvia the secretary, adopted a questioning attitude to officials, pushing them to clarify issues and answer difficult questions.

Questions also came from the floor, and at times there was quite lively debate. As explored in the previous chapter, it was discussion around the behaviour of young people which would stir up especially strong feelings. For example, when the local housing officer spoke she would inevitably be asked what more could be done about young people around the shopping centre. Sometimes, however, it was the residents' group themselves who came in for criticism, for example over plans to provide facilities for young people. Jill and others tended to take on the role of defending young people in these meetings. Indeed, throughout the meetings, they would take every opportunity to underline the positive achievements of the area's young people. For example, Jill often mentioned the work the children

involved in the Dream Scheme did on elderly residents' gardens, emphasising how hard they worked 'for the community'.

Apparently at times feelings around these issues had spiralled out of control. At one meeting, before I started my fieldwork, there had been 'very heated' discussion of the proposed new children's play area at the Millpond. This had originally been planned to include older children/young people's equipment as well, although this had been dropped following such meetings. Jill had had to threaten to call the police at one stage. Chairing the meetings could be generally quite challenging, although Jill normally managed to find a balance between letting people have their say and controlling particularly loud or belligerent participants. She is a softly spoken person, as she herself said, she couldn't shout, but just had to say the right things to keep control. 'It's Any Other Business that gets me', she said, 'you never know what's going to come up'. However, she said that she was glad that they had that space for local people to bring things up.

Of course, heated discussions could also lead to issues being raised in a potentially positive way. At one meeting a woman from a voluntary sector organisation came to give a presentation around mental health issues. She was proposing setting up some kind of support group on the estate, an idea which seemed to be getting positive feedback from the audience. As already mentioned, this seemed to be an important issue for many residents, although one that was rarely openly discussed. However, there was a man sitting near me who was sighing and making comments under his breath. After the presentation he asked the woman how they were

funded, and muttered something about a waste of money. Sylvia, the secretary asked him what his problem was with the idea. 'I'm afraid I can't say', he said, 'there are too many ladies present', and then walked out. Sylvia said, 'well, I don't know what his problem was, maybe he's suffered himself, but I do think that there's too much of 'that' round here, too much ignorance, that attitude'. A few women present then talked about their own families and the ways in which problems of depression and alcoholism had affected them. It was quite a powerful moment, with a sense of people recognising common problems. Nonetheless, these connections seemed to be between women, and the fact that it was a man who walked out was perhaps significant. Again this was an occasion when a sense of gendered dynamics became apparent, maybe linked to women's particular relationship to the domestic sphere.

As I have suggested, the spaces of the Westfields open meetings therefore constituted more obviously 'public' events, which were more visible and formally structured than meetings and interactions at the New Beginnings Centre. Holding the meetings was a way of demonstrating mechanisms through which the group could be seen to be a formally accountable and representative organisation for the estate. Indeed the local people came to the meetings who would not necessarily have dropped in to the centre, or accessed the group's other activities. I noticed that committee members did not necessarily know the residents who came to these meetings. However, other local people clearly felt excluded by the formality of the events, and either didn't attend, or felt unable to speak or express their views. Those that did speak tended to be those that came to

the meetings regularly, and were predominantly older. Young people were noticeably absent in general. In these issues the group ran up against some of the same problems encountered by the local authority-led forums, which attempted to construct public spaces of debate within certain conventional understandings of this.

Nonetheless, whilst not entirely successful, the group did try to run the meetings in ways which gave local people some sense of power in relation to decision-makers, to hold officials accountable to them. To an extent this was successful, and as I have mentioned officials who came were often very closely questioned. This did not necessarily happen in the same way at the community facilitation service meetings which I attended, where there was often more of a sense of deference towards officials. Furthermore, the meetings did provide a structured forum where concerns could be raised in an open way, such as the discussion around mental health. Contentious or conflictual issues might have been difficult to discuss in the more intimate setting of the New Beginnings Centre, where arguments quickly seemed to become personal. As noted, a space for open discussion at the end of the meetings was seen as particularly important. In such ways, the meetings enabled interaction and collective action in somewhat different ways to other spaces produced by the group. In the final part of this section I will discuss their work with children which, as at Riverlands, seemed to be a key aspect of their activities.

5.3.5 Play sessions at the community hall and elsewhere

Besides putting on lots of one-off events and parties, the group ran a kids' club at the community hall every Monday evening and Saturday afternoon. I went to help out on one very wet Saturday afternoon in July. The hall is essentially one large space with tables and chairs around the edges, with a small kitchen and a couple of store cupboards off to one side. When I arrived two of the committee members, Pat and Heather, were sorting out some toys to put out. I asked if they wanted any help but they said not to worry, they didn't get too much out, the kids liked to come in there themselves and choose. They also seemed a bit worried that not many children would come, what with it being so wet. There was a similar sense of nervousness as at the start of sessions in Riverlands.

They needn't have worried, because streams of children quickly started arriving, and there were soon around 40 there altogether. The official age limit for the club is thirteen, and the youngest ones were around three, although there were also some babies with parents. I have already discussed the family relationships and networks of childcare which linked together the women involved with the group, and this partly defined the dynamics of the sessions with children. The volunteers themselves often directly brought children along, either their own, or friends' and relatives', but beyond that they seemed to know most of the children well.

The room was set up with a DVD player in one corner and a video-game in another, and then various boxes of toys as well as larger toy cars, houses and so on in the centre. Pat ran a tuckshop from the kitchen

which had a hatch into the main room, from where she also gave out tea and biscuits for the volunteers. Apart from two or three slightly older boys who played on the video-game for the whole session, the DVD player and the video-game were ignored by the kids who played with each other around the room in little gangs. Overall, the children were very much left to play in the ways they wanted, with little intervention from the adults present, except to sort out conflicts or other problems.

However, they did run an organised activity at each session which the children could take part in if they wanted to. On this occasion Claire arrived soon after the start of the session, with materials for making Chinese paper dragons out of brightly-coloured folded crepe paper. She'd brought one she'd made at home, 'I was up half the night making it', she said. The idea was that the kids could carry them at the carnival in a couple of weeks time (which I discuss in Chapter Six), and indeed the activities at these sessions were often linked to upcoming events like Christmas, or a Hallowe'en party or Easter.

Claire organised a big table and set out piles of crepe paper, sellotape and scissors and began to round up kids to take part. About twelve sat down while Claire explained the various stages. There were also two young mothers and a dad who joined in, with Claire and I circulating around the table to help out the children who needed it. Strips of crepe paper were woven together and then each woven section was stuck together to form a long dragon body. Everyone, including the adults, struggled with sticking together the sections, and many of the dragons started looking very lop-

sided. The two mothers were laughing at each other's dragons, 'What do you expect, I've been stuck at home for two weeks by myself with no-one to talk to', one of them said.

In this way doing practical and material activities with children had the potential to create connections between the adults present as well. For example, I spent much of the session with the dragons helping a boy who was struggling a bit. I was trying to help him stick his dragon together and eventually Claire came over to help as well. We were trying to get him to put his thumb to hold the paper in place until we put the sellotape on, but he kept on getting in a mess with it. Claire and I started laughing, a small moment of connection (albeit at the little boy's expense). However I think it was an affectionate moment, 'Kids aren't', Claire said, 'they're... not nimble-fingered are they?' Again, as at Riverlands, such activities could also generate senses of achievement, for both adults and children. At the end of the session the dragons were put on display, with others commenting on how successful they were.

These connections and achievements were not without their difficulties or limitations. In terms of the adults present, the kids club was dominated by women, and again, at times this seemed to become an issue. At the session described above Claire was encouraging the one father there to help a little girl with her dragon. He struggled with it more than anyone and eventually he got up and went to play on the miniature pool table with two boys. I sensed that he felt uncomfortable being the only man present, and didn't feel able to interact with other people's children with the same

ease as the women. This perhaps ties in to my discussion in Chapter Two about the particular dynamics of child-centred activities, and how this affected my own involvement as a researcher. On another occasion when I came along to the club a dad showed up at the end to collect his daughter. He was a bit early and Pat said, 'Why don't you come in and get her, come and have a cup of tea if you want?' But he refused, 'no you're alright' he kept saying, and stood outside waiting instead.

As at Riverlands, the Westfields group also extended play spaces outside of their buildings, and also like them, had campaigned and fundraised for the development of a new children's play area. This was at the Millpond, a green area at one side of the estate. The Millpond is accessible from the estate only by footpaths and is surrounded by quite dense bushes and trees. The fact that it is hidden from the rest of the estate made it feel potentially quite threatening. It is a certainly a place where groups of young people went to hang out and drink, and the new playground had been seriously vandalised at times. As already mentioned, the group's original plans for the site had been to create somewhere more inclusive, for teenagers as well as children, but this had been blocked by opposition from other residents.

Nonetheless, the group clearly valued the space, and organised clean-up events for children and more generally took an active interest in the wildlife there. A group of swans live at the pond (and would sometimes wander around the estate) and there was apparently also a kingfisher, which some of the group had seen. Over the summer, the group worked with the

council to put on outdoor play sessions there. These involved bringing along bouncy castles, and a sound system, as well as a range of outdoor games and activities. They were immensely popular sessions and as soon as the bouncy castle went up children would run up the footpaths to come and join in. I noticed that when the space was being used in this way other people would wander around the area, whereas otherwise it tended to be rather deserted. The activities of the group clearly had the potential to animate other neighbourhood spaces in new ways, and to draw out some of the positive potentials which I described in the previous chapter. Indeed I shall explore some more specific events that seemed to do this in the following chapter.

Therefore the play sessions with children at Westfields worked to find a balance between the dynamics of informality and sociability, and giving both children and volunteers more structured senses of achievement. As I discussed in relation to the Riverlands' sessions, working on material and practical tasks together with children had the potential to generate new connections between people, although I have noted that at times these might be limited by gendered dynamics. Overall I want to draw attention to these spaces as important achievements, and to finish this chapter I will briefly re-iterate some aspects of these achievements in relation to both groups.

5.4 Conclusions: public spaces?

The spaces I have written about in this chapter are certainly 'everyday' in that they are non-spectacular, even banal. However I want to suggest that they are significant achievements for the groups, indeed that they form the centre of the groups' work to improve life in the localities. I also hope that this chapter has demonstrated the fragility of these spaces, which are only held together by patient, careful work over time. Many of the conversations I had with the group members, particularly the two chairpersons, highlighted a sense of struggle and difficulty as much as success. Within such projects very small achievements, like somebody speaking at a meeting, or coming along to an activity for the first time, could be highly important.

In talking about the groups' spaces as 'public' spaces, I want to suggest their potential and significance within the collective life of the neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, considering emergent, everyday spaces such as these, 'that may be temporary or barely visible' (Watson 2004: 220), means thinking differently about what a public space is and how it is formed. Here I will return briefly to the analytical framework around public spaces which I introduced in Chapter One. Firstly, in terms of forms of spatiality, in this chapter I have drawn attention to the range of practices through which these spaces are made: from discursive and representational strategies such as newsletters and displays; formal meetings and occasions; modes of socialising and talking; to shared

material activities such as cooking, gardening and crafts projects with children.

In particular, I have tried to emphasise the importance of shared practical activities, what Tim Ingold (2000: 197) calls the shared 'taskscape', and of 'helping out' relationships, in creating connections between individuals and between different groups, especially age groups. Overall this means considering the spatialities of public spaces in new ways, paying attention to multi-sensual and embodied qualities as well as more representational ones. In this chapter I have also tried to give a sense of the fragile and emergent qualities of the groups' spaces, which made them hard to sustain and hold together, but also presented potentials for shared senses of achievement when they were successful.

Indeed the spaces of both groups can be seen as potentially enabling negotiations between different groups, especially different age groups. In this chapter I have focused on this in relation to the work of the Riverlands' group with young people in particular. These negotiations seemed to take place less through forms of representation and discussion, and more through embodied and material practices, of the kind often associated with domestic or intimate spheres of activity. However, in this chapter I have also touched on the difficulties which the Westfields group experienced in involving men with their activities. Many of their spaces felt strongly female-dominated, and whilst I would not want to deny the role or importance of such spaces, ultimately the group wanted to work with men as well. Indeed Jill said to me on a number of occasions that she felt that

they would be stronger as an organisation if they had more men involved, in that they would be reaching more local residents.

Whilst the spaces of the community groups were not necessarily gendered, they did clearly break down straightforward boundaries between 'public' and 'private' spaces. In particular, family life and relationships were heavily bound up with the lives of the groups. I would argue that a sense of continuity between private or domestic and public lives made the groups' spaces particularly productive and accessible for local people. Linked to this, the groups were concerned with individual life experiences and subjectivity, rather than the more impersonal modes of interaction which might normally be associated with the 'public'. Ideas about 'gaining confidence' and personal achievement were important to both groups, although this does not mean that they were not focused on collective and more outwardly visible goals as well. Nonetheless this does suggest a mode of politics in which the formation of subjectivities is an important goal in itself; this recalls Gary Bridge's (2005: 85) concept of the public 'as fluid, emergent, and as much about the formation of self as the constitution of a wider public'.

However, the formation of public spaces through such a mode does raise questions about access and accountability, given that more intimate kinds of relationships can exclude others. Clearly there are different kinds of 'difference', and I have touched on the limits of their work with other groups and projects outside the neighbourhoods. For the two groups this was also often experienced as a tension between being an 'informal' and a

'formal' organisation, with pressure from local government and service providers to work within more structured procedures and mechanisms. Such structures could be beneficial to the groups and could allow them to be seen as representative and accountable organisations, but also threatened to undermine the nature of their work and indeed alienate local people.

Therefore there was an ongoing balancing act around degrees of officialdom and bureaucracy. This ties into issues of the relationship between public and private forms of collectivity, and also with the issue of the relationship between public spaces and the state. The groups' relationships with the local authority and other services providers were complex and under constant negotiation, and this seemed to be necessary in order that the groups could both gain support and resources, yet also retain some control and autonomy.

As noted at the start of this chapter, such spaces constitute one kind of 'public space' for people within the two neighbourhoods, albeit one which I want to suggest is particularly important. However, it would be wrong to suggest that new forms of collective action could be brought about solely through the kinds of spaces and activities outlined in this chapter.

Therefore in the next chapter I will move on to discuss what I am calling 'spaces of performance and occasion', in which I suggest different, more visible and obviously 'political' versions of publicness are produced.

Chapter Six

Spaces of performance and occasion

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I worked to show how, over time, the two community groups develop a particular version of 'public space' through their ongoing and 'everyday' activities. These spaces are constituted in a variety of ways, but perhaps particularly significantly through shared practical and material activities. I suggest that through these shared practices, potential for new connections and negotiations is produced, for example between younger and older people, or just between people who didn't know each other previously. Such spaces have strong connections to what might be thought of as private, or domestic space, and this means that they are bound up with personal lives and individual subjectivities.

Both groups work to support individual as well as collective senses of achievement. Connections to private or domestic lives also mean that the spaces negotiate a tension between 'formality' and 'informality', in ways which are linked to local government and other official structures. Overall, I aimed to show the significance and positive potential of these spaces.

As I noted at the start of Chapter Five, these 'ongoing' spaces were punctuated by particular 'occasions' for the two groups. The events which I am classifying as 'occasions' were mostly planned events like parties or festivals, although they might also be more spontaneous, like the meeting

I describe below. As I hope will become clear, they were marked by spaces being produced which had a strong symbolic or representational value, and were an explicit intervention into shared discourses and feelings, particularly around the local area. For example, the Westfields festival (which I go on to discuss below) was clearly seen by the groups as in some senses a statement about the Westfields area, against the background of the issues and feelings about the neighbourhood I explored in Chapter Four. Claire said to me that it was important that the festival carried on, 'because people always say that nothing happens around here'. The festival is somehow a highly visible event, not just within the neighbourhood, but also to the broader population within Stoke, the local media and local politicians especially.

The spaces I go on to discuss in this chapter are therefore perhaps more obviously 'public spaces' in comparison with those explored previously, at least under certain definitions of this, and are perhaps more obviously 'political'. Indeed they do constitute the kinds of spaces which are more likely to be discussed in the academic literature on public spaces; for example, Sharon Zukin (1995) talks about festivals and parades as one way in which less powerful groups can intervene in the meanings of urban public space. Such events might also fall into the category of 'deliberately meaningful' spaces which Gary Bridge (2005: 85) suggests are often understood to make up the public realm.

However, in trying to think about these spaces from the groups' perspectives, I would suggest that it makes more sense to see these

spaces as part of a continuum of spaces and times in which the groups operate within their neighbourhoods. Such a continuum means that these spaces also have links to private lives and spheres, and trouble clear categorisations into public or private, formal or informal, sociable or political (see Staeheli 1996). These spaces, like all spaces, are made through a variety of modes, including embodied and material practices, as well as the more representational and symbolic ones which I have drawn attention to. The spaces are also still strongly motivated by connections of sociability and of care or 'helping out', and by goals to support and encourage individual expression and development, in the ways that I described in the previous chapter. As I hope will become clear, this sense of continuity between the groups' spaces is important in considering their potential.

Therefore in my view it would be wrong to see the more obviously 'political' spaces I consider in this chapter as the most important or significant. In discussing women activists in public housing in Chicago, Feldman et al (1998), set up something of a hierarchy between 'sociability work' and real political engagement, with the former seen as essentially a precursor to the latter. However, I would disagree with this sense of hierarchy, in that I see the groups' ongoing spaces as at the core of what they do, and important achievements in their own right, as I hope was clear from the proceeding chapter. As James Scott (1985) has argued, whilst visible, direct and symbolic forms of politics may be fairly unusual within a particular context, collective action may nonetheless be taking place in different ways.

This is not least because it is often difficult for less powerful groups to enter spheres defined as conventionally political. Indeed, these spaces of 'occasion' are marked by somewhat different forms of politics, with different issues at stake. In attempting to extend their work into more visible or symbolic arenas, the groups have to contend with new barriers and constraints, in contexts which are often powerfully weighted against them. In this sense, a distinction between public and private spaces, as a distinction which is socially constructed, is experienced by the groups.

For example, the groups found it relatively straightforward to get support from the local state in the form of small grants and training schemes for their ongoing work of sociability and care. However, when the groups wanted to do projects in more visible contexts, which demanded more financial support, but also more recognition of their political presence, they ran into opposition. There was a sense in which the less visible and more private work of ongoing activities in the neighbourhoods was seen as more 'appropriate' for them to be involved in.⁶⁴ In fact one senior council official said to me (indeed I think he was indirectly referring to the Westfields' group because he knew of my interest in them) that he felt that 'community groups should spend more time working locally and less time campaigning'. Beyond the ways in which their work might be circumscribed by the local authority, the groups also had to contend with the constraints of what can be called local 'political society' (Corbridge et

⁶⁴ Of course, as I have indicated elsewhere, such 'private sphere' activities are undoubtedly beneficial to the local state in lots of ways, in that they help deal with many of the neighbourhood issues which service providers would otherwise have to tackle.

al 2005: 188, following Chatterjee 1998), some of the dynamics of which should become apparent over the course of this chapter. As Corbridge et al (ibid: 190) discuss, such a realm of power struggles mediates between local people and government, perhaps in less positive ways than a conceptual framework of 'civil society' might suggest. In particular, I touch here on the relationships between the groups and elected councillors and members of parliament. As with my discussion of *The Sentinel* newspaper in Chapter Three, I want to suggest that spaces purporting to represent 'public opinion' may exclude other voices in important ways.

Therefore, to summarise: in this chapter, I want to show how these occasions are a continuation of the groups' everyday activities, an extension of their projects. However, as I shall go on to show, these occasions also presented new spheres of political action in which the groups were often heavily constrained. Nonetheless, I do not want to suggest that the groups would have been better off sticking to their less 'visible' work, as the council officer would have liked. Winning visible battles with the local authorities, or putting on events for which they gained a different kind of recognition could be important for the groups, and encouraged them to demand more resources and support for their work. One arts worker, who was heavily involved with the festival, said (at a meeting with the group) that it was important because it showed the world that Westfields was a place where people 'think big' and are 'ambitious'.

A festival is still not a very obviously 'political' event, although the group nonetheless had great difficulties finding funding for it. Indeed it was

perhaps in more formally political contexts, such as public meetings, that the groups struggled the most, where they were discursively positioned in quite particular ways, as I have begun to indicate. Therefore in this chapter I am going to draw a further distinction, between more formal 'political' occasions, which I will consider initially, and events organised more around celebration, such as the carnival already mentioned. This distinction is again more about positioning within a context than the substance or aims of the groups' activities within either kind of space. Nonetheless, because this distinction is recognised by others, as with the broader distinction I have made between ongoing spaces and occasions, it impacts on the groups.

6.2 Spaces of 'politics'

6.2.1 An emergency public meeting

I am going to begin this section with a discussion of a meeting at Westfields, which was held because the situation around the redevelopment of the shopping centre seemed to have reached a crisis point. I will then go on to consider some other occasions more briefly. This meeting was probably the most classically 'political' occasion which I attended during my fieldwork, and in line with what I suggest above, it brought the group into contact with other agendas and other forms of power, within which they had difficulties asserting their own position and priorities. Ultimately it did not seem to have been a very successful occasion for the group, in terms of advancing the redevelopment or effectively communicating their perspective. I discussed the meeting at

some length afterwards with Jill, the chairperson, and she was very critical about what had happened. I shall highlight some of her specific points as I go through.

I have outlined the situation with regard to the shopping centre in previous chapters, but to recap here briefly the group had been involved in discussing a proposed redevelopment for over three years. During this time they had taken part in numerous consultation exercises, and reports and masterplans had been produced. They had also developed their own plans for a community centre there, which had had to be abandoned because of needing to wait until the 'bigger picture' for the arcade became clearer. The group essentially wanted a 'thriving' centre for the estate, and for a new community facility to be at the heart of it. As already mentioned, when I was discussing the need for more volunteers with Karen, the group's treasurer, she said she felt this would be easier in such a new centre, where people would be more likely to 'drop in for a cup of tea' and then from that get more involved. This demonstrates the way the group sought to base their work on sociable, everyday connections within public spaces.

At the time when I started doing fieldwork, a new masterplan for the arcade had been drawn up some months previously, but any plans for action seemed to have reached a standstill. An emergency public meeting was called after a meeting with council officials in which the group were told that Westfields was no longer considered 'a priority area' and it was confirmed that the latest masterplan had effectively been shelved. As

discussed in Chapter Four, it seemed likely that this was linked to the priorities being given to areas through the Housing Renewal Pathfinder programme. The local MP (whom the group already knew fairly well) began to take an interest in the situation, and I had the impression that he had suggested the public meeting, although this was not made explicit to me.

A few days before the meeting flyers were put through all residents' doors which were headed 'URGENT', and went on to ask, 'Did you know that Stoke-on-Trent City Council no longer consider Westfields as a priority area? Do you want to have your say? We were led to believe that we would have a new well-needed shopping complex. But your so-called council has betrayed us'. Details of the meeting were then given, which was to be held at the day care centre where the group ran the kids' club and other activities. Even with the flyers, the group told me that most people came because they were personally approached by them and asked to attend. In this sense it was still 'word of mouth', and relations connected to family and friendship, which mobilised local opinion.

Indeed the turn-out was impressive, with over 100 residents there, far more than normally came to the group's open meetings. The room was packed out, with lots of people standing at the back, and there was a sense of anticipation, as more and more residents arrived, with people greeting each other and talking about the situation around the shopping centre. I felt that Jill and others from the Westfields group felt nervous about how the occasion would pan out. Again, as with other formal

meetings, many of those attending were elderly, although there were also families with young children who ran around throughout. As with the open meetings, there was a 'top table' at which were sitting not only the core committee of the residents' association, but also on this occasion the local MP and a couple of local councillors. Jill said to me afterwards that in retrospect this was a mistake, they should have been the only ones sitting up at the front, it was supposed to be their meeting after all. Also significant was the presence of a reporter from the local newspaper, *The Sentinel*, which I discussed in Chapter Three. He was young and smartly dressed, wearing a suit and tie and scribbling in a reporters' notebook, and so was highly conspicuous. Indeed I felt that his presence had a strong impact on what was said at the meeting and how it was framed.

Although the meeting was opened and chaired by Jill, neither she nor the other committee members present were given much opportunity to speak, and proceedings were heavily dominated by the MP, as well as the councillors present, who were all male and middle-aged. Indeed, as soon as the MP was given a chance to speak it became clear that he intended to dominate the meeting. He had a very over-bearing way of speaking, banging on the table, and repeating many points two or three times, in a style which Jill later described as 'oppressive'. He spoke of his anger of the way in which the people of Westfields were being treated, saying that the reason why the shopping centre scheme had been shelved was because the elected mayor wanted to concentrate all spending on Hanley, to create a 'professional quarter'. The MP also said specifically that the council were getting £12 million per year 'Neighbourhood Renewal'

money, which was all being spent in Hanley rather than in neighbourhoods.⁶⁵ Such investment would never reach Westfields, where it was really needed.

Many of the MP's comments got rounds of applause, and it was clear that many people present accepted the kind of analysis he was putting forward. Throughout his speech, people in the audience either called out or put their hands up to make contributions. At one point somebody shouted out a comment (which I didn't hear properly) about asylum seekers getting new housing built in Hanley, a rumour which I had heard before. 'Now I'm not going to get into that', the MP said, 'but that may very well be important here'. Other people brought up issues around the council mismanagement of the Cultural Quarter project which had recently been covered in *The Sentinel*, as discussed in Chapter Three. However, even in response to these broadly supportive comments, the MP gave little time to local people to express their views, and interrupted many comments from the floor. His speech was followed by speeches by three local councillors which broadly followed the same lines of argument, although one of them (who is chair of the local Primary Care Trust) made some more locally specific points about mental health issues in the area, and how a more thriving centre to the estate was part of tackling this. Indeed I understood later that this councillor was broadly supportive of the elected mayor, and he clearly wished to move the discussion away from the issues that the MP had raised.

⁶⁵ This statement was almost certainly inaccurate. As discussed briefly in Chapter Three, Neighbourhood Renewal money is divided up through a complex set of procedures which means that it is spent in a rather diffuse way across a local authority area, with an emphasis on small grants, training and new forums and mechanisms.

Afterwards, Jill and other members of the community group said a number of times that the councillor and MP were clearly 'jumping on the bandwagon' and that they had their own agenda. Unlike the group, they had not been engaged with the issue of the community centre over the long term. Indeed, as should be clear, the kinds of broader issues raised were tied to the discursive structures of 'local politics' or local political society more generally, which I explored in Chapter Three with reference to *The Sentinel*.

Specifically, discussions at the meeting linked in to the nexus of debates around the changing economic circumstances of the area, and the concentration of investment in Hanley as an economic strategy for the city as a whole. As described, these debates were heavily discursively structured by the reportings of *The Sentinel*, and the meeting took place soon after extensive critical reports around the 'Cultural Quarter' project in particular. Such issues, and indeed the discussion at the meeting, were also linked to the power struggle between the elected mayor and the councillors. The MP who was present on this occasion clearly sided with the councillors over this, and saw the meeting as a chance to promote this point of view.

When I discussed the meeting with Jill afterwards, her feeling was that Westfields' loss of political importance was more likely to be to do with the Housing Market Renewal programme, as mentioned. The programme was targeting regeneration investment in selected areas of housing, crucially

those which were seen as having the potential to contribute to overall economic growth, of which Westfields was not one. Nonetheless, Jill was always very pragmatic and balanced in her views, and said that some areas were clearly more in need of investment than others, and also that investment in Hanley was important in terms of the overall economy of the area, although of course this did not mean that the Westfields project should be abandoned. However her more nuanced views were essentially lost during the meeting. The event got reported in the Sentinel under a broader article about areas outside Hanley losing investment, with the MP quoted as saying, 'we cannot allow our community to be effectively sacrificed so Hanley can have top priority'.

That said, Jill and other group members did manage to make a few comments towards the end of the meeting, and to turn attention more specifically towards the needs of local people in relation to the central square. For example, there was discussion of the need for a better choice of shops and more fresh food at cheap prices. The elderly in particular relied on the Co-op shop which often ran out of meat and vegetables. The council had put out a statement (which the MP read out) saying that they were still committed to a general 'programme of improvements'. One woman said, 'We don't want cosmetic improvements, hanging baskets and that'. 'That's right', Jill said, 'We can grow our own flowers'. A number of people made quite emotional speeches about what the estate had been like in the past, along the lines I explored in Chapter Four. At the close Jill thanked everyone who had contributed from the audience, 'I know it isn't easy, to have the courage to stand up and speak'.

At the end of the meeting it was agreed to try and meet with the elected mayor to discuss the situation, and people called out questions they felt that he should be answering. This meeting did take place after a number of delays and cancellations, but seemed to have little effect. At the time of finishing my fieldwork a new 'Action Plan' for the centre had been produced, which seemed to confirm the residents' worst fears about the 'programme of improvements'. The 'action points' were very non-committal, such as 'Investigate feasibility of providing architectural treatment to retail shops', and 'Further discussions to explore the possible use of the Co-op store for community activities/other developments/environmental improvements'.⁶⁶

The group had planned the meeting in order to generate support and gain publicity by voicing their concerns in a more 'public' way than previous meetings and discussions. However, the event drew attention to the ways in which the arenas of 'local politics' or political society in Stoke, its spaces of public opinion, were heavily dominated by certain discourses and positions that claimed to stand in for the voices of local people. As discussed in Chapter Three, such representations do both reflect and form local people's views. Yet they also potentially impede other voices and other issues from entering public spaces of discussion. Therefore, in this instance, the group were not only trying to enter into debate or contest with the local authority decision-makers over the shopping centre, they were also struggling to actually enter the sphere in which this contest took

⁶⁶ However, as noted in Chapter Four, since finishing my fieldwork more ambitious long-term plans for the centre of the estate seem to be on the local authority's agenda again.

place. This was starkly illustrated in the meeting described. Nonetheless similar dynamics were present on other 'public' occasions, as I shall discuss in the section that follows.

6.2.2 Modes of local politics

The dynamics of the meeting I have just described represent one example of a mode of local politics which tended to be male dominated, and was broadly exclusionary of the group members I worked with, and indeed of other local people. This mode seemed to be particularly associated with a sense of occasion and visible performance, in other words of being 'in public', within certain understandings of this. For example, the local councillor for the Riverlands area appeared to be supportive towards the group on an ongoing basis, and often dropped into the house. Sandra told me that he had given them a lot of help, especially initially. However, at the Annual General Meeting, which was supposed to be an opportunity for the group to be visible locally, to draw in new supporters and so on, he was a dominant presence. The meeting was chaired by the local community facilitator, a young woman who was new in the post, and she sat at the front with Sandra and some of the other committee members. Other local people sat in rows of chairs facing them.

The councillor, however, stood up throughout the meeting, sometimes standing at the front, or roaming around at the back, interjecting comments. Most significantly he kicked off the whole meeting by introducing the community facilitator, 'We have a new young girl here

tonight, the pretty one there in the middle'.⁶⁷ The councillor also intervened at other points in the meeting, particularly when the discussion became heated around issues of young people, when he tried to calm down the debate. In fact he did this reasonably effectively, but the effect was to position himself, rather than the Riverlands group, as the mediator of local opinions and concerns.

Again, part of what was at stake on this occasion was an ongoing power struggle between the council officers (the community facilitator, and a housing officer who was present) and the councillor, a struggle which appeared to leave little room for the community groups. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, the community facilitation service seemed to have partly been set up in order to bypass the councillors and get in touch with local people more directly. For example, councillors were specifically excluded from attending the Community Network meetings, and certainly the service overall was highly unpopular with councillors, as I was told by many people. Indeed whilst the facilitation service fell short of really involving people in decision-making in many ways (as discussed in Chapter Three), the dynamics of the associated meetings were different. In particular they seemed to avoid a sense of the gendered power relations associated with local politicians. This was helped by the fact that many of the community facilitators were young women, and indeed there were also a number of black and Asian people employed. This highlights the clashes of approach which might arise between local government-led initiatives around public participation, and broader structures of local politics

⁶⁷ The women involved in the group were also nearly always referred to as "girls" by male officials, often in the context of phrases such as, 'you girls do a lot of good work'.

(Corbridge et al 2005: 168). As already mentioned, the facilitation service was disbanded soon after I finished my fieldwork, essentially it seemed because of opposition from councillors, although apparently lack of funding had been given as the 'official' reason.

That is not to deny that gender, and indeed class positions and related assumptions, could not become a factor in the groups' relationships with local authority officers more broadly. In the introduction to this chapter I suggested that certain activities were seen as 'appropriate' for the community groups to be involved in. At a discussion session I ran with the Westfields group, they told me that overall they felt 'patronised' by council officials, although they did have good relationships with certain officers, as discussed elsewhere. Karen said, 'They just think we're loud-mouth wotsits, you can tell that's what they're thinking'. She also said that she felt they were 'stereotyped': 'People have a certain idea of a single mum from a council estate'. Sandra at Riverlands felt that they were categorised by officials because of where they lived, 'Just because we talk like this and we're from Riverlands doesn't make us, you know, idiots'. Jill at Westfields also suggested that officials didn't think they were 'clever' enough:

They think about being "clever" in certain ways, more like academic skills or things on paper. We haven't got that but we all have different skills [...] like making people feel comfortable, that's a skill, not everyone can do that.

This last point highlights how the groups emphasised ways of being which they felt weren't valued within a certain sphere of 'public' local politics, either by local authority officers, or indeed by those who claimed to officially represent local people. Such practices of care and sociability were clearly more conventionally linked to home life, or private spaces, as opposed to the kinds of visible public spaces of local politics discussed here. Nonetheless, although I have emphasised the exclusions of such practices from these spaces so far, this was not always the case. In the next section I will consider how such modes might intersect within certain spaces and times.

6.2.3 New spaces of local politics?

Even when certain established forms of political discourse and debate seemed dominant, other values and modes might also be present on the edges. Both at the public meeting about the community centre and at the Riverlands AGM, teas and coffees were literally being made at the sides of the rooms and brought around to people individually. This small act in itself made people feel welcomed and was a chance for a different kind of interaction, more informal and personal. As Young (2000) suggests, these kinds of greetings and interactions can actually be highly significant. In the case of the Riverlands AGM, a few of the teenagers involved with the group were making the drinks, and they also stayed around for the rest of the meeting. Their presence was quite unusual at these evening meetings, which tended to be dominated by the elderly.

Indeed the strong commitment of the Riverlands group to provide spaces of expression and empowerment for children and young people produced a different dynamic at some of their events. For example, over the summer they put on an opening party for the playground and 'kickabout' area which the group had initiated and worked on with the council. Importantly the young person's forum had also been heavily involved. This was therefore a celebratory occasion and an important and visible affirmation of the group's work, particularly within the context of local tensions around young people and their presence in neighbourhood spaces, as discussed in Chapter Four. In many ways this was a very traditional 'public occasion', with prominent roles taken by the Lord Mayor, who officially opened the facilities, and the local councillor. Nonetheless other practices, associated with hospitality, sociability, and the kind of shared material experiences valued by the group, were also in evidence.

The day of the party was boiling hot and around 50 people assembled initially at the playground, where there was pop music on and lots of kids already playing. Those present included local families, councillors, teachers from the school and council officials. Some of the adults also joined in and tried out the equipment, with the high wire slide as particularly popular, whilst others stood around and chatted. Sandra and some of the other community group members were dressed up in smart clothes. As it was a Saturday, the officials had come in their own time, some of them bringing family and friends. In particular, the local community facilitator had brought her young grandson in a pushchair, and he attracted a lot of attention. After the ribbon-cutting ceremony,

everyone walked up together to the 'Community Learning Centre', a room at the high school used for training and homework clubs. A couple of committee members had put on a huge spread of sandwiches, cakes, biscuits and snacks. They'd made everything at home and carried it up to the school.

There was a general buzz with people chatting to each other and eating and drinking. Children quickly started playing on the computers and reading the books which were in the centre. After half an hour or so everyone gathered around for speeches from the Lord Mayor and the councillor, who both spoke in glowing terms about the group's work. The Mayor gave out certificates to young people who had participated in a play training course. Then, significantly, Sandra's 17 year-old daughter spoke about the teenagers' group and their involvement with the playground and sports area. This was the only time I ever heard a young person speak at an official event like this. After the speeches people went back to chatting and eating and lots of people commented afterwards that there had been a 'good atmosphere'.

As already suggested, this occasion seemed to be an important visible affirmation of the community group's work, reflecting their core values around sociability, care and a commitment to all age groups. Partly this was achieved through the speeches, the presentation of certificates, cutting the ribbon, and an overall sense of symbolic performance, which represented the group and their achievements locally. A visible staging of 'hospitality' was important here, in that the group had invited everyone

who came individually, and obviously organised food and drinks, drawing on the group members' resources from their private or domestic lives. The occasion was also made through more material and embodied practices, such as the sharing of food and drink in itself, and the collective games on the new play equipment. In particular, such an event could potentially create new connections and identifications between local people and officials. For example, the fact that officials came with their children immediately brought them into different relationships with others present.

Similar dynamics were apparent at the Westfields group's Annual General Meeting. This was approached in a somewhat different way to the Riverlands' AGM, in that after the formal meeting there was a meal put on, 'as a way of thanking everyone that's supported us locally', again a huge spread of sandwiches, cakes and biscuits. As at the Riverlands party, there were a number of local authority officers, councillors and other workers present, who had been individually invited to attend. During the meeting Jill gave a detailed run-down of the group's activities during the year, and thanked all the other committee members and volunteers. She started crying as she was talking about their commitment, 'I do this every year', she said. Then the committee officially resigned and were voted back in again, as indeed had happened at the Riverlands meeting. Jill said, 'Thank you for your faith in me' as she resumed her position as chair.

These last two examples are intended to demonstrate that there were certain occasions when the groups did seem able to assert their core ethos within visible times and spaces. As already discussed, these

occasions were partly staged as spaces of hospitality and sociability, and had connections to private and domestic lives. Material and embodied practices were important to understanding their success. In many ways these spaces felt more inclusive of local people, and indeed more productive in terms of asserting the groups' projects than the more narrowly defined sphere of 'local politics' that emerged from the occasions I discussed earlier.

Nonetheless, that is not to say that everyone locally felt included. For example, at the playground opening party there were quite a number of the young people involved present, but there were many others who weren't there, as became apparent when the Mayor read out the names on the certificates. Whilst we were outside by the play area there was a group of young lads hanging round in the background drinking cans of lager, which could be understood as a form of participation in itself, but they certainly didn't seem very engaged by the occasion. Furthermore Paul, the committee member who ran the allotment project, came to see the opening ceremony, but then didn't come back to the school afterwards. Indeed there were other volunteers and committee members too who didn't come along. Paul said to me later that the event wasn't his 'kind of thing... standing round and talking, I'm not good with that'. This was the kind of comment that I heard many times in relation to formal council-run meetings and events which residents often felt excluded from.

The event was undoubtedly too tame for the teenagers and too formal for Paul. Also, clearly in itself it did not resolve the many difficulties facing the

Riverlands group, who struggled to assert the needs of local people to the authorities, in a neighbourhood which was also not seen as a 'priority'. So whilst this kind of occasion should never be the only sort of public space available to people, I still feel that these represented important events for the groups. They were certainly not easy events to put on, and beforehand there were always numerous small panics and problems, for example people threatening not to attend. In this way I would also emphasise that these spaces were achievements, as discussed in the previous chapter, which were always contested and uncertain.

These events therefore both enabled the groups' work to be visibly recognised, and brought together different age groups, as well as local people and officials, to potentially create new connections. At the playground party I chatted to a community development worker who had just got a different job elsewhere but who said that she loved being around Riverlands, felt that it was 'her community', and was going to continue to come and see everyone. She did do this, and as previously mentioned, brought her children along to the group's summer play scheme. This ties in with the points I discussed in Chapter Three, about the potential for 'new collectivities' of officials and citizens opened up by processes of engagement between local authorities and local people. However, as this example suggests, such collectivities did not necessarily emerge from the official spaces in which such engagement was staged.

6.3 Spaces of celebration

6.3.1 Celebration and sociability

As I have begun to suggest, events organised by the groups under the sign of 'celebration' or sociability somehow allowed them to assert their values and practices more successfully. Such spaces, unlike the formal spaces of 'local public politics', had a more fluid sense of the boundaries between public and private realms of activity, between formality and informality, and between the local authorities and local people. In this next section I am going to try to draw out some of the symbolic, experiential and affective values of two 'celebratory' events in particular, a Midwinter Lantern Parade put on by the Riverlands group, and the Westfields Festival, which I mentioned at the beginning. Again, I also want to underline the struggles involved in putting on these events, their precarious and emergent nature, although it was perhaps also these qualities that ultimately generated senses of achievement.

In emphasising the importance of these occasions, I am wary, as I mentioned at the start, of implying that these are therefore the only spaces which the groups should seek to participate in, that they would be better off not attempting to participate in more obviously political spaces. There will always be other kinds of public spaces, and as already noted, this plays into the arguments of those who wish to view their activities as marginal. So whilst other forms of public politics remain valued it is right that the groups should continue to try to have a presence in these other

forums. Nonetheless, ultimately I want to suggest that the forums of public politics themselves might be reconsidered, especially in this context, where they seem to exclude many local people.

6.3.2 Riverlands Midwinter Lantern Parade

Sandra had told me the very first time we met in the spring that the group had plans to put on an event over the winter, 'to give people a bit of a lift', when there wasn't much going on compared to all the trips and kids' activities of the summer. I understood that a lantern parade had been held on another nearby estate, funded and organised by a Sure Start programme. In fact the Riverlands group initially hoped that Sure Start would also support their parade, but they were turned down, so decided to go ahead by themselves. Sandra in particular always refused to be deterred by lack of funding or official support.

As already emphasised, although the groups faced less barriers in some ways with these kinds of events, they were certainly not straightforward undertakings. Faced with lack of funding, Sandra told me that in the end they only spent 'about a hundred quid' on the parade, plus donations in kind, loans of equipment and so on, which all had to be negotiated and gathered together. The parade therefore involved a substantial amount of preparation beforehand, including finding and decorating a Santa's sleigh (as well as recruiting someone to dress up as a Santa), working out a route, buying and wrapping presents for children, and making endless mince pies, sandwiches and cakes. As always, the majority of this work

fell on Sandra and Mick. 'We'll do something smaller next year', Sandra told me the night before.

A local arts organisation had held lantern-making workshops at the community house beforehand, and Mick also came up with his own design for electric lanterns with little hand-held switches. On the evening itself both wheelchairs and elderly people had to be transported up the hill to the school hall where everyone was assembling, and where the party was going to be held afterwards. As well as five or six elderly people in wheelchairs, there were a number of small children and babies in buggies. Sandra had also organised blankets for those in wheelchairs, and I noticed her going around to each wheelchair and tucking in the blankets. Gradually other people started assembling, dressed up in costumes to varying degrees and some carrying their own lanterns. There were around 80 people altogether, and this included local authority officials and teachers from the school.

It was a freezing cold night, and as we all went outside to begin I was struck again by how dark and quiet much of the estate felt at night. There was some hesitation initially about where we were going, with people organising themselves into groups and so on. However, once we set off I felt a powerful sense of what it meant for us to be walking outside together, within the context of the feelings of fear and isolation which circulate locally, as I discussed in Chapter Four. There are lots of patches of empty land in the neighbourhood, which feel particularly threatening to walk besides after dark. Indeed it was very unusual to see people outside

in the evenings, except for small groups of young people. Yet this evening the atmosphere was completely different, and there was a tangible sense of the re-making of space. This was helped by the fact that lots of houses had Christmas decorations up on the outside, some absolutely ablaze with light.

The procession followed an organised route around the estate and was led by the Santa and sleigh (a truck driven by Sandra's brother), which was playing Christmas carols that people sang along to somewhat sporadically. There was a sense of solidarity between the walkers, with people chatting to each other, and swapping over to push the wheelchairs. Small children leapt about the edges, running backwards and forwards, and when we went past the play area some of them ran down to play on the equipment in the dark. As we went through each street adults, and especially children, came outside to watch, most of them not knowing what was going on. Some of the volunteers were giving out sweets and lollipops. In some ways the walk actually highlighted how many people weren't involved with the group and hadn't come along to the parade. Several people offered money thinking that it was a charity event.

We all stopped for a while at the local old people's home whilst a group went in to sing carols there, and with that the whole walk took about an hour and a half. Sandra had already had to run on ahead because some kids were causing problems back up at the hall, nicking sandwiches and things. As so often with the group's activities, there was a sense of fragility, that 'trouble' might erupt at any time, the atmosphere only really

held together by Sandra and Mick and few of the other volunteers. Indeed one of the council workers present that night commented to me how incredible it was that they kept going, and refused to be deterred by these kinds of problems. 'They always give people a second chance', she said to me. In the end the party back at the school seemed to go off well, with children visiting Santa's grotto, eating, drinking and chatting and people taking photographs of each other's costumes. Again there were teachers and council workers present as well as local people.

Afterwards the group seemed happy with how the event had worked out, and were already talking about making it bigger and better next year. Although the parade had been very much dominated by a Christmas theme, it seemed to me that the most powerful aspect of it was simply about being outside, together, in the dark, animating the streets in a new way. As I suggested, the parade worked to contest understandings of the outdoor neighbourhood spaces as fearful. Furthermore the group seemed to realise that such an event could create new connections between people. Unlike more 'everyday' activities, such occasions offered a more symbolic and visible way to assert positive senses of local identity. Also, because of a sense of such spaces being separate from 'ordinary' spaces, they could perhaps tackle more difficult or challenging issues. Indeed the following year the Riverlands group took up a suggestion made to them by the local Racial Equality Council that they organise it as a multicultural event. This involved working with a Muslim group from outside the Riverlands area, to produce an event with a joint Eid and Christmas theme.

Sandra in particular threw herself into the challenges of organising this event, for example buying, preparing and cooking chickens from a halal butcher, although she also said that it had been difficult, with meetings that were too long, and where there was too much talking, not enough action.⁶⁸ However these processes of preparation could clearly generate new connections in themselves. On one occasion whilst I was working at the community house an Asian woman came along with her two young children, to talk to Sandra about the parade. In the event though, they all got involved in the art activity which was going on, and stayed longer than just for the meeting.

This needs to be viewed within the context of a neighbourhood that was almost 100% white, and where race and ethnicity were not necessarily part of the everyday interactions around 'difference' that I have drawn attention to in relation to different age groups, or gender, or residents from other neighbourhoods.⁶⁹ Nonetheless this was clearly a highly discursively loaded issue, which I felt could be sometimes sensed in the background of conversations and interactions. In order to put this in context, briefly, it is worth noting that the BNP were active across Stoke as a whole whilst I was doing fieldwork, when local elections were held.

Whilst there is only one BNP councillor in the city, they tended to gain a

⁶⁸ Unfortunately the event itself took place after I had finished my fieldwork in the area and I was unable to attend it, but I did see the preparations beforehand and heard accounts from the group afterwards.

⁶⁹ Following Bonnett and Nayek (2003), I do not want to suggest here that because of the lack of ethnic diversity in the neighbourhoods, 'whiteness' as a category did not come into play. Rather it was constructed in particularly complex ways, which, as I note, I do not feel in a position to comment on in any detail. However, I would question whether understandings of the neighbourhoods as 'white' spaces constructs them as spaces of privilege or power in the ways that Bonnett and Nayek (ibid) argue.

significant proportion of the vote in many wards. Racial politics were clearly present in the discourses that circulated locally around asylum seekers (an issue often discussed in *The Sentinel*, not least in the letters pages) and I did come across examples of occasional blatant racist talk during the time I spent there, although not directly among members of the two groups with whom I centrally worked. As a response to all this, I also came across a number of anti-racist and multicultural initiatives organised by local agencies and the voluntary sector. In particular, the young people's group at Riverlands participated in a number of initiatives around combating racism.

This was therefore a form of 'difference' which was constructed in quite complex ways. Both Sandra at Riverlands and Jill at Wesfields were clearly aware of, and concerned about, this whole nexus of issues. When I did ask them about race as an issue directly, they were keen to refute any suggestion that because the neighbourhoods were white, they were racist. I felt that they implicitly assumed that this would be my analysis, given my position and background, and again this suggests the kind of discursive formations that came into play around this issue.⁷⁰ Jill once made a point of saying to that she thought that the Westfields area would be better if it was more racially mixed.

Given all this, I found it hard to reach conclusions about levels of tolerance or more broadly the status of race as an issue within the neighbourhoods.

⁷⁰ In particular this made me consider the layering of class and ethnicity in discussions around racism, whereby white 'working class culture' is perhaps understood as inherently intolerant, and this perception is recognised by those might be labelled in such a way.

However it is interesting that at the kind of celebratory events I am discussing, both Sandra and Jill chose to involve non-white groups, as I shall describe in relation to the Westfields festival, below. I understood this involvement as both a way of making a visible statement to those outside the neighbourhoods about the kinds of places they were, as well as perhaps challenging prejudices within it. Certainly these occasions, which had the potential to make new kinds of temporary spaces, offered an opportunity for difference and antagonism between groups to be approached in creative and experiential ways, which may have been difficult within more established discursive framings.

6.3.3 Westfields Festival

Such potentials for connections across different groups were present at the Westfields Festival, which took place in August, although it certainly wasn't organised as primarily a 'multicultural' event. As mentioned at the start, the occasion was talked about as something visible and ambitious in an area without other cultural activities or events that were accessible to everyone. Claire said to me that she just wanted her children to have a day that they really enjoyed. The festival included a carnival parade which toured the local area and a fete on the school playing fields including a fun fair, a stage with live music, activities for children, stalls, competitions, demonstrations of dance and martial arts and more.

As with the lantern parade, the organisation of the event caused considerable stress and tension. The whole event was under particular pressure the year I attended, because of essentially losing their funding

from the local health initiative that had supported it in previous years. The festival was put on 'on a shoestring' compared to previously, and fairly late in the day it was decided to cut it down to just one day, rather than two, as it had been before. Also, whilst in theory the festival was organised by a committee comprising a number of local groups and organisations, in practice the Westfields group felt that they had contributed far more than others. Furthermore there were some clashes of style and approach between the community group members and the professional community arts organisation they employed to organise aspects of it, although such disagreements were fairly incidental and seemed to have been forgotten once the event was actually over.⁷¹

As the day itself approached, the need to focus and get things organised became the priority. I attended a carnival costume-making workshop a couple of days beforehand where people were frantically making spectacular papier-mache animals and birds, mostly for children to wear. There were a few arts workers around, but generally people were just getting on with the costumes themselves, with grandmothers, aunts and mothers all brought in to lend a hand. There was a sense of some panic, but also of anticipation about the event, as the costumes began to take shape and children tried them out properly for the first time. Working together on the costumes was a chance to discuss other things as well, and some of the children were talking about the approaching new school term.

⁷¹ Indeed the arts organisation had been involved locally over many years, and the co-ordinator clearly knew many local people well.

The day of the festival itself was extremely hot. The event didn't officially start until lunchtime, although when I arrived at the school at around 10am, lots of the volunteers had been there since 7. Pat was doing car-runs up to the school to bring up endless cakes, for the Westfields Residents' Association stall, which also had a tombola and was selling various other bits and pieces. Pat's aunt had helped her with the cakes and it had been a last minute rush. Pat had also brought drinks and sandwiches for the volunteers to have throughout the day, which she pressed on everyone at regular intervals.

As indicated earlier, Jill had organised for the main stage to be run by a local black arts organisation, which put on break-dancing displays throughout the day as well as offering opportunities for kids to try out Djing and graffiti on a special screen. The MC, a middle-aged man with long dreads, essentially compered the whole festival, telling people what was happening when and where, and announcing the carnival queen and other notices.⁷² The break-dancing in particular drew large crowds, and was performed by a mixed group of white, black and Asian young men. Some boys who were part of a jazz dance troupe which had performed earlier also joined in. Jill was really pleased with the way the arts organisation had worked, given that young people could be disruptive at such events, 'they've kept the kids entertained all day, we've had no trouble at all', she said.

⁷² This announcement was kept very low-key as it had apparently caused tensions in the past!

Jill was also really pleased with the carnival parade, which arrived at the playing fields led by a group of stilt-walkers/dancers in multi-coloured and multi-layered dresses. As well as all the children and young people in elaborate papier-mache costumes, the arts group had organised a samba-band, some of whom were apparently refugees who worked on music projects with the arts organisation. They stayed around the stage area for a while, putting on an impromptu acrobatics display. Jill, with whom I was watching, said that she was really glad that they'd got the arts organisation involved, against the background of some resistance from other committee members. 'Artists are just a bit mad, aren't they,' she said, 'that's what good about having them involved'. Although she did not at any point say anything explicit about race or multiculturalism in relation to the festival, I sensed that she was talking about the ability of the arts group to challenge or disrupt some of the more conventional cultural practices in the area.

Nonetheless, there had apparently also been a few complaints about the MC, with people saying that he was too loud or that they didn't like the music. Indeed many of the other performances and activities at the festival were less challenging in this way. For example, a whole area of the field was taken over by 'dance troupes' of young women doing majorette or cheerleader style dancing, which overall suggested a very conventional version of femininity. Indeed, whilst I have emphasised the potential of events like the festival to produce new kinds of connections and subjectivities, it is important to recognise that they could also involve

performing and reaffirming more traditional identities. These were clearly part of local people's cultural practices as well.⁷³

Overall, the festival seemed to have been considered a success. As at the Riverlands parade there was an incident towards the end of the day with a gang of kids trying to steal flags and other equipment. However, when all the volunteers sat down at the end, with some wine the arts coordinator had brought along, everyone was hugging and congratulating each other. I had spent the day working as a 'marshall' with other volunteers, some of whom weren't normally involved with the residents' association or other community groups. The other marshalls included a young man, whose presence was very unusual for the Westfields group, where the volunteers were mostly women. He told me that he'd been meaning to get involved with the residents' association for a while, he'd really enjoyed being a marshall, and planned to do more 'for the community' now.

So the festival could also galvanise people to work together in new ways, although as I said at the beginning this was not without tensions. At the time of finishing my fieldwork the residents' group were not happy because the local councillor seemed positioned to take over as chair of the festival committee. Jill was trying to encourage Claire, a woman in her thirties

⁷³ I was watching the dancing with a volunteer from another local community group, and although I didn't say anything critical, I think she sensed that I felt slightly uncomfortable with the costumes and style of dancing, which seemed both strangely sexualised for the little girls and child-like for the older ones. 'Don't they have dance troupes in London?' she asked me, laughing. I said I wasn't sure but that I hadn't seen anything like it before. Although this was only a tiny moment, I think her reference to London suggested an awareness of my own positionality and gaze in relation to local people and practices, as in my discussions about race mentioned above.

who hadn't been involved with the group for very long, to put herself forward as an alternative. Claire said that she was worried that she wouldn't say the right things; this was a 'public' role which involved organising other local organisations and also acting as a spokesperson. 'But you'd learn', Jill was saying, 'with that group you'd quickly learn'. Jill had said to me in the past that she wanted Claire to take on more of a leadership role, but this was the first time that Claire had actually seemed interested.

The festival could also make the work of the community group more visible outside the area; for example it was always covered in *The Sentinel*, with lots of brightly-coloured pictures of costumes and entertainers. However, the year I attended the article itself was mostly taken up with an interview with a 'committee spokesman', the local councillor. Although he may have been involved in other ways he certainly didn't do any of the practical day-to-day organising that the group members were involved in, and indeed the committee had been chaired by Jill. Once again it seemed that others stepped in to represent local people when the work of the groups entered certain official spheres of public discourse and local politics.

6.4 Conclusions

To conclude, both the 'celebratory' events I have discussed obviously had their limitations as spaces, and certainly weren't attended by everyone locally. They were not hugely radical events which suggested dramatic shifts in the dynamics of the neighbourhoods. But they were nonetheless significant achievements, especially given very little funding or official support. These represented public spaces, made through a range of symbolic, experiential and material practices, in which local people could come together and new potentials could be produced. The senses of 'occasion' they generated punctuated the ongoing work of the groups, enabling new senses of achievement. Events like the carnival and lantern parade would be anticipated and worked on for weeks or months beforehand, and then discussed and recollected afterwards. Such events could produce, at least temporarily and in a small way, new connections, feelings and identifications between people, for example between different age groups, between council officials and local people, and perhaps also between different ethnic groups, although I have indicated some of the complexity surrounding this.

Such events also offered opportunities for the two community groups to assert their values and projects in more visible arenas, which they often struggled with in more conventionally 'political' public arenas. In this chapter, I have suggested some of the ways in which these contexts could be weighted against members of the community groups. Here they

seemed to encounter a sense of division between public and private spheres of action, which could work to exclude their voices and values from certain spaces. As I have suggested, such a division was also linked to gender and class positions. Indeed I have tried to give a sense here of how 'local politics' as an arena could contain such exclusionary dynamics, and therefore further complicate the groups' relationships to the state and to spaces in which they might access power and resources.

Nonetheless, as discussed earlier, even where the groups did succeed in asserting themselves in more visible, spectacular and 'public' spaces, this does not mean that these represented the groups' most important achievements. Such events could only take place because of their much more low-key, ongoing work, which in the end would perhaps lead to more lasting transformations. In an immediate way, perhaps as important as the events themselves were the spaces surrounding them: meetings, mask-making workshops, frantic cooking sessions, as well as discussions afterwards, and time spent looking through photos and making them into wall displays. More broadly though, there was an awareness that enabling new senses of the public, or new forms of action, could only be achieved through long term, patient work which could be frustrating, difficult and certainly unspectacular. At a discussion near the beginning of my fieldwork on Westfields, somebody from another community group was talking about the sense of achievement that she felt when they got a new play area on their estate and had an official opening. However, Jill said that she didn't agree, 'events like that, that's just for show, for the press and that, I get more sense of achievement working with people locally, just

chipping away'. This comment seems to sum up the ways in which the groups' most important spaces were not those that were necessarily understood as the most 'public' or visible, and I hope that the previous two chapters have given a sense of what this 'chipping away' might involve. In my final chapter I am going to try to pull together what such spaces might tell us about the nature of public space.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

7.1 Learning lessons

I began my thesis with a brief discussion of my own experiences of government urban policy and interventions, and my desire to think through issues of 'public space' with more care, as tied to broader issues of collective action and democracy within cities. Such a concept clearly remains complex, and over the course of the thesis I have explored a range of spaces, including government policy programmes, meetings and forums, the local newspaper, the outdoor spaces of the two neighbourhoods, and centrally, the spaces and events developed by two community groups. All of these spaces might be seen as broadly constituting spaces of 'publicness', in terms of spaces that enable interaction and collective action. They are also all linked together, and influence each other, indeed are formed 'relationally' (Massey 1993).

Practically, from the perspectives of the two groups, this means that the issues that they wished to tackle were strongly shaped by these other spaces and projects, in ways that could both limit and open up possibilities for their own work. For example, the work of the groups with young people was delineated by dynamics including local authority approaches and interventions within the neighbourhoods, as well as positive feelings around sociability between families and across generations which

circulated locally. It is within this context that the achievements of the groups should be recognised, rather than deferring to what Corbridge et al (2005: 153) call 'an "ideal outside", or a world where politics can be properly constituted and made to secure its desired effects'.

Indeed, Corbridge et al (2005) suggest that academic narratives have a tendency to over-dramatise or romanticise political action that might be undertaken on behalf of marginalised or relatively powerless groups. The same criticism could equally be made of government policy discourses which, not surprisingly, tend to make sweeping claims for the ability of state interventions to re-shape the everyday lives of members of society. For example, David Blunkett's (2003: 43) lecture on 'civil renewal' concluded:

We must aim to build strong, empowered and active communities, in which people increasingly do things for themselves and the state acts to facilitate, support and enable citizens to lead self-determined, fulfilled lives. In this way, we will genuinely link the economic and the social, the civil and formal political arena, the personal with the public realm.

However one responds to such statements in terms of an ideological project, I hope I have shown here some of the complexities of the settings in which policy interventions are played out, affected by dynamics from the individual approaches of particular local government officials to place-based narratives and feelings around change.

I am dwelling on such complexity, because, in this final part of the thesis I want to pull out some theoretical insights around the nature of public space, but also more practical issues which might be relevant to a range of people working in similar contexts, especially policy makers and government officials. Yet an important conclusion in itself is that where new kinds of public space were being opened up within the neighbourhoods, such change was often discontinuous, small-scale, contingent on many other spaces and factors, and not directly shaped by government initiatives in any straightforward manner. Sandra and Mick at Riverlands told me, 'you can't just take what we've done here and do it somewhere else, because everywhere is different'. Nonetheless, I want to argue that my exploration of issues of public space within a particular context has relevance to other debates and other spaces. In the rest of this chapter I am going to use the theoretical framework I originally set up in Chapter One to try to pull together such points. I will essentially begin by focusing on more broadly-based theoretical or conceptual issues before discussing more specific practical ones, although I would emphasise that the two are clearly intertwined.

7.2 The spatialities of the public

In Chapter One, I began by discussing the fragmented and sometimes contradictory ways in which current government interventions have sought to reconstitute senses of 'the public' in a variety of policy arenas. Such a context suggests the formation of new kinds of spaces, from more orderly and controlled street environments (Blair 2001) to forums of participation

in local government decision-making (ODPM/Home Office 2005). The need to produce or shape these spaces is seen as crucial to a project of enabling a more 'active' and engaged public, within certain understandings of this, often tied to ideals of harmoniousness and consensus (Cooper 1998). Nevertheless, as I have shown over the course of the thesis, official attempts to shape such spaces were often highly unsuccessful.

By contrast, some recent academic writing, from a more 'critical' perspective on the constitution of the public, has framed public space in terms of 'the most highly symbolic urban public places' (Goheen 1998: 494), which in practice have been central outdoor spaces within certain cities. The processes that produce these spaces as 'public' are often understood as processes of visible or symbolic struggle between different groups or interests within cities (eg Mitchell 1995). Such a focus suggests that qualities of 'public-ness' are to be found only in certain spaces and times, under conditions that might never arise in many contexts. This is true in relation to my own empirical context, where, whilst the spaces of the two neighbourhoods were subject to a variety of uses and understandings, these did not generally result in dramatic protests or clashes, or in visible interventions in the built environment in a process of 'framing a vision' (Zukin 1995: 259) according to the perspectives of those in power.

By contrast to both these sets of spaces, my focus on the spaces produced by the two community groups draws attention to the importance of very ordinary and informal spaces, which may be invisible 'in the

interstices of everyday life' (Bridge and Watson 2000: 377). Such spaces nonetheless enable forms of interaction and collective action in potentially significant ways. In seeking to understand how such spaces are formed, I have focused on an active sense of the making of spaces, rather than working within the parameters of certain types of spaces (such as parks and squares, or public meetings), which is arguably the approach of both the policy-orientated and academic literature on public spaces.

Therefore I have discussed practices that might take place in a variety of contexts, including streets and parks but also inside houses, on allotments and in school buildings. I shall discuss debates around public spaces and 'difference' as opposed to consensus below, but at this point I want to emphasise that such spaces did involve struggle and uncertainty, although this was not usually overt or dramatic. Rather the groups were involved in ongoing and painstaking negotiations over time to sustain them as spaces of collective action. For example, over the course of a session with a group of young people, volunteers might fail to show up, there might be an argument between groups of friends, or the young people might all decide to leave half-way through, all of which happened during my fieldwork.

Throughout the thesis though, I have tried to think about how such spaces are positively sustained. One way of doing this has been to draw attention to the role of material practices and everyday forms of sociability that worked to draw people into shared senses of collectivity. These ranged from 'hanging out', and ongoing talk and jokes, to 'helping out', and participating in activities like cooking and gardening.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, the significance of such practices was not often articulated by participants, and nor could they necessarily be understood or accessed through observing specific spaces. This is therefore in contrast to research into public spaces which privileges the visible and observable (eg Low 1999b). Indeed my research material is strongly linked to my particular use of ethnography as a method. By working as a volunteer, placing myself in a position of 'participant', my theoretical perspectives on these spaces developed in particular ways. This ties in to the debates around 'non-representational theory' or 'theories of practices' that I touched on in Chapter One (Thrift 1996; 2004). For me, thinking in terms of materiality and practices enabled me to access certain qualities of spaces within this context, and sensitised me to affects that might otherwise go unnoticed. Although, as I noted, such approaches have been criticised for not being sufficiently 'political' (Nash 2000), I found such an emphasis productive as a theoretical and methodological 'point of departure' rather than as a set of conclusions or theoretical end-points. This suggests the importance of empirical research that explores such approaches within specific spatial contexts.

7.3 The public and the private

A distinctive quality of the spaces of the two groups were their links to private or domestic lives, in ways which have been drawn attention to by the feminist analyses that I discussed in Chapter One (eg Martin 2002, Milroy & Wismer 1994; Stoecker and Stall 1998). Practices such as

cooking and gardening, informal modes of sociability, generosity and hospitality, and relationships of 'helping out' and care, clearly drew on group members' experiences and resources from home lives. Also important was an emphasis on nurturing individuals and groups to achieve and develop 'confidence' over time, as I discussed in relation to the groups' work with young people in particular, as well as in relation to the volunteers involved with the groups.

The location of many activities within houses seemed to contribute to a sense of local people 'feeling comfortable' within these spaces, in ways which they did not necessarily in more formal spaces of state-led participation, or within the outdoor spaces of the neighbourhoods which were associated with fearfulness for some residents. This sense of 'feeling comfortable' was significant in generating what Gibson-Graham (2001) call 'local capacity'. In fact Gibson-Graham also draw attention to the importance of sharing food and of informal sociability and fun in enabling new kinds of connections and interactions. For those involved with the community groups, cultivating such capacity often meant developing a sense of personal capability in the face of difficult individual circumstances, including burdens of care for other family members, mental and physical health problems, and material poverty.

Indeed such a context needs to be born in mind when making any kind of assessment of the significance of the work of the two groups. Although I have drawn attention to the skills and resources from domestic lives which local people were able to draw on in their projects, within such

circumstances, people might also struggle to feel able to contribute to collective activities. Mick told me that when they approached other residents about getting involved with the group they generally said, 'oh, well, I'd be no good to you because I'm no good at anything'. However he also said that once people came along to something and began to interact with others, these feelings might change. Again this suggests the potential of practical experiences of participation and embodied involvement, wherein small-scale achievements and actions, like helping a group of children to make a cake or decorate a box, could be highly significant.

The domestic or family lives of those involved with the groups, which can therefore be understood as a source of both resources and sometimes of difficulties, were clearly shaped by gender to an extent. At points throughout the thesis I have drawn attention to moments when gender seemed significant in forming the dynamics of certain spaces. As already noted, it is gender-based analysis which has generally drawn attention to the importance of spaces which disrupt traditional boundaries of public and private (eg Fincher and Panelli 2001, Staeheli 1996), within the overall suggestion that women's collective action is shaped by their particular relationship to the private or domestic sphere. Nonetheless, as I suggested from the start, I would not necessarily classify the work of the groups overall as essentially 'feminine', partly because the groups themselves were clear that this was not how they wanted to operate, and indeed men were involved with both groups to varying extents. However, clearly the gender of those involved did become significant at particular

times, including when the groups sought to represent their work in more traditionally 'public' contexts, such as the meetings discussed in Chapter Six, which tended to be male-dominated. Operating within these spaces required the groups to cultivate other kinds of capacity too, such as finding the confidence to speak at large meetings, and confronting officials and local politicians, in contexts which were often powerfully stacked against them. It also meant finding creative ways to assert their values and practices within more 'visible' forums, such as the celebratory events I also explored in Chapter Six.

In the ways that I have discussed therefore, movements between conventionally private and public realms of activity were not necessarily straightforward for the groups, and depended on patient negotiations and work over time, from supporting particular local residents to come along to meetings and events, to finding ways of being listened to, and taken seriously by local decision-makers. Indeed, whilst recent analysis of women's activism may highlight an ability to make 'strategic use' (Fincher & Panelli 2001: 129) of traditionally public or private realms and spaces, it is also important to recognise the ongoing difficulties for the groups in crossing such boundaries. In particular, the association of the groups' work with domestic and family lives meant that they could be more easily sidelined in conventionally 'political' contexts.

Negotiations between public and private realms were also tied up with how the groups positioned themselves in the face of policy initiatives that

worked to regulate or formalise the work of such organisations, arguably around particular agendas. Initiatives to provide training and support, and put in place formal policies and procedures could be helpful for the groups, and could indeed make them more transparent and accountable for local people. For example, Sandra told me that she felt having written policies gave people 'somewhere to go with a grievance'. However such structures also risked drawing the organisations away from the informality, fluidity and links to private lives which were important to their success, as well as ultimately removing power from local residents. This is perhaps a perennial issue for such locally-based movements, one which Castells (1983) explores through narratives of the incorporation or co-option of neighbourhood-based organisations into state-led structures or programmes.

More specifically though, such a relationship between the spheres of action of such groups and those of the state plays out in particular ways within the current policy climate of 'Third Way' politics, with its emphasis on family and community life (Giddens 1998). As discussed in Chapter Four, government's interest in neighbourhood-based groups and actions can be seen as part of a project to structure 'politics' around micro-level rather than broader ideological concerns (Rose 2001). Indeed I am aware that in my own focus on private or domestic lives, the arguments of my thesis tie in to a policy focus on such issues, and therefore might be subject to the same criticisms. However, I am not advocating these contexts as the only spaces of political engagement, and I hope to have drawn attention to forms of subjectivity and interaction that, whilst

conventionally associated with private lives, could also be applied to contexts beyond domestic or familial settings (Smith 2005). In approaching the neighbourhood as a setting I have also tried to think beyond particular conceptions of 'community', as the cohesive or harmonious entities, which are often promoted in policy discourses (Imrie & Raco 2003b). I shall return to this issue in the following section.

7.4 Public spaces and 'difference'

As noted, one of the criticisms of paradigms of 'community' as a way of promoting neighbourhood-based politics has been that this notion promotes ideals of consensus (Imrie & Raco 2003b; Cooper 1998). By contrast, the kind of critical writing about public space that I referred to at the start of this chapter has drawn on an understanding of 'the public' which emphasises the importance of contest or even conflict in its constitution (Mouffe 1994). As Rosalyn Deutsche (1996: 289) argues, 'Conflict, division and instability... do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence'. In using a framework of 'public space' to think through the projects of the two community groups and the contexts in which they operate, I want to follow this line of thinking to an extent in suggesting that their work involves contests, collisions and negotiations between different groups or interests, in ways that certain paradigms of 'community' might seek to ignore or actively erase.

Nonetheless, perhaps unlike some of the writing on public space discussed earlier, I am also interested in focusing on how and where

senses of connection between different groups might be generated, and how these might enable new forms of collective action. The commentaries of writers such as Mitchell (1995, 2004) or Deutsche (1996) clearly play a role in raising questions about the discourses of public space promoted by those in power. However, within the context of my fieldwork, to affirm or draw attention to fragmentation and particularity within public spaces did not seem like a sufficient end in itself. If elderly people were too frightened to leave their houses to come to a meeting because of feelings about young people, then this suggests the need for practices which at least allow differences to be brought into view in a less threatening way. This underlines the importance of focusing on specific empirical examples in working through the 'difficulties of living with difference' (Watson 2002: 62) within public spaces.

In relation to young people, who were clearly constructed as 'different' in very powerful ways within the two neighbourhoods (see Valentine 2004), both groups worked to recognise their distinctive needs, and provide them with senses of autonomy and territory, rather than trying to subsume or exclude young people in the ways that state interventions seemed to focus on. Moreover, the groups also worked to promote forms of dialogue and connection across different ages, in what might be termed practices of 'negotiation' (Massey 2005). As indicated earlier, such negotiations seemed to take place in particular through shared material practices and relationships of 'helping out' and everyday sociability.

Nevertheless, the concept of 'difference' is obviously a complex one which cannot necessarily be thought about in a unified way within a particular empirical context. As I hope my empirical material has shown, categories of 'young people' in the neighbourhoods broke down into further divisions of gangs, friendship groups, different age groups and by gender. More temporarily, on a particular evening a group of friends might have fallen out with another group, and these kinds of divisions required micro-level negotiations within the spaces of the groups' activities. Such divisions could never be settled and therefore these negotiations were ongoing and not finite.

Furthermore, issues around 'young people' presented immediate, pressing and visible 'problems' which group members often had particular investments in, for example in terms of being the parents of teenagers and children themselves. More broadly though, other forms of 'difference' may have been more difficult for the groups to tackle, reflecting wider discursive determinations, feelings and practices, as I shall outline below. However, before discussing such limitations to the groups' projects, I want to emphasise again that within the contexts in which they were working their interventions should be seen as significant achievements.

Nonetheless, in Chapter Four I touched on some of the difficulties for the groups in working with residents from other neighbourhoods, heightened by a need to compete for resources and support. In Chapter Five I also discussed the lack of men involved with the Westfields group. As with a consideration of the needs of young people, I would draw attention to the

value of some of the female-centred spaces that the group generated, especially given their exclusion from other spaces of 'politics'. However, they ultimately felt that their work would be more effective locally if they had more men involved, and struggled to enable such involvement.

In Chapters Four and Six I also briefly discussed issues of race and ethnicity in the neighbourhoods. As I argued, this is a form of 'difference' that was clearly constructed in particularly complex ways, and around which I found it difficult to reach empirical conclusions. It was certainly a difficult issue for the groups to work with, although, as I have indicated, one which they both made attempts to address. The midwinter event working with a Muslim group on Riverlands seems to have been particularly successful, and suggests the value of supporting such groups to make specific and practical connections with movements in other areas or with other kinds of membership. This was in contrast to projects aimed at tackling 'racism' as an overall discursive or structural entity (which the young people of the neighbourhoods in particular seemed to be subject to) which perhaps risked being disconnected from everyday practices and concerns.

7.5 The public and the state

A further significant axis of 'difference' which arose within the groups' spaces was between local people and local government officials. This clearly brought into play particular sets of power relations, and working with officials often meant working across quite different understandings of

the purposes, practices and contexts of their projects. For the groups this involved learning to present their localities' needs in particular ways, and to work through or perhaps overcome the conceptions of small community groups held by local government actors.

This needs to be understood within a context in which government officials were subject to complex and sometimes competing sets of pressures, discourses and directives around the nature of public spaces and the public more broadly, especially in relation to their role within regeneration and urban development projects. In Chapter One I set out a number of different modes of 'public-ness' which I suggest are present in current national policy discourses, that I characterised as a consuming public, a participatory public, and a public in need of shaping in potentially authoritarian ways. In Chapter Three I traced these modes through the voices of officials in Stoke, as well as exploring ways in which 'the public' of Stoke-on-Trent is constructed by discourses, practices and sites such as the local newspaper. In Chapters Four, Five and Six I focused on some more specific encounters between officials and local people in the neighbourhoods. In all this my aim has been to produce an account of the workings of the state that is both critical and sympathetic, as well as pragmatic about the complexities of the arenas in which policies are played out (Corbridge et al 2005).

Therefore, I am concerned to be critical about some of the versions and practices of publicness which arise from current policy modes. For example, I have drawn attention to the shortcomings of many of the formal

structures and meetings set up by government to supposedly enable local participation and engagement. These tended to engage only a minority of residents in initiatives where the possibilities for accessing power and resources were limited. Indeed I have drawn attention to the ambivalence of government actors about the ability of local people to engage with decision-making in a 'responsible' or 'strategic' way, and have shown how the work of these groups was often sidelined within official contexts.

I also want to highlight here in particular the failures of local government to intervene in positive ways around the role of young people within the neighbourhoods. State-led interventions often worked to exclude young people from neighbourhood spaces and forums, and to effectively reinforce negative perceptions and tensions around them as a group. As I discussed in Chapter Four, such tensions threatened to undermine senses of collective life in the areas where I undertook research, and contributed to senses of living in places 'under siege'.

However, neither do I start from the premise that all state interventions in the neighbourhoods had negative impacts, and indeed the work of both groups point to ways in which relationships with local government might be productive. On a very straightforward level the local state provided some degree of material and institutional support for the two community groups. Even so, both groups were very clear that their organisations were ultimately 'owned' and sustained by local people, and this seems to me crucial in understanding their successes. This ties in with my discussion around how far the groups might be co-opted or controlled by policy

agendas. Relationships between the groups and local government and agencies involved constant and painstaking negotiations around degrees of formality, autonomy and ultimately power. In considering the overall issue of the relationship between the public and the state, there is perhaps no straightforward way of characterising such negotiations, except that they demanded perseverance and tenacity, as well as flexibility from both officials and local groups.

Such negotiations might begin to take place within the context of formal meetings and initiatives around participation, which, despite their limitations, could always open up possibilities for dialogue and change, perhaps in unexpected ways. However the groups seemed to benefit most from long term, supportive relationships with individual officers, who took them seriously and viewed their work as significant within the neighbourhoods. Such officers could also be effective allies within the complex dynamics of local 'political society' (Corbridge et al 2005). As I have worked to demonstrate, the sphere of 'public politics' was difficult for the groups to enter, not just because of how structures around formal 'participation' were set up, but because of wider dynamics of power and influence. In particular I drew attention to the relationships between local councillors and officers and how these might exclude other local voices. As Hilary Wainwright (2003: 105) writes, 'power is not easily shared by those whose own power is insecure', and such an analysis could probably equally be applied to both councillors and officers.

Because of such complexity I would suggest, following Cochrane (2003), that it is in considering sites of contact between local citizens and the state it is productive to carefully trace new forms of negotiation and political legitimacy, rather than trying to categorise power as lying either with the state or with the public or civil society. I would also suggest, as I have already emphasised, that relationships and outcomes from such contexts are not pre-determined. Indeed the new forms of interaction and collective action enabled by the groups' spaces might include connections with government officials, and the formation of 'new collectivities' (Barnes et al 2004) between state actors and citizens.

Furthermore, I have also worked to show that the outcomes of policy interventions within the neighbourhoods were partial, contested (including by government actors themselves) and often discontinuous. Whatever their ideological starting points, initiatives which at least offered opportunities for further resources, or for dialogue, within areas that sometimes felt abandoned by the state could be catalysts for change in various, perhaps unexpected, ways. It is within the context of such complexity that I will try to make some recommendations for government actors in particular. These clearly resonate with the issues and points already raised in this chapter.

7.6 Sustaining public spaces?

I have chosen the word 'sustaining' here, because it seems to me that government or other official agencies should not be hoping to produce or even significantly shape the kinds of public spaces I have been discussing. Rather spaces of interactions and collective action for local people need support and resources in particular ways, as I shall set out here.

- **The need for long-term support:** As I have argued throughout, in the neighbourhoods where I undertook research, making spaces which brought together local people was always a difficult and precarious process; the groups succeeded only by taking a long term approach, and being extremely patient and tenacious. Small moments of connection between people, or just someone being present in a space, could be important achievements in their own right. Individuals and groups might come up against problems which stopped their work for a while, or issues which might seem to have been resolved (for example difficulties with a group of young people) might unravel again. All this suggests the need for long term approaches to the making of public spaces, and this should be reflected in policy frameworks and resources made available over time.

In terms of resources, neither of the groups I worked with had access to secure funding for their ongoing activities. They both had small short-term grants for core administrative costs from charities (Comic Relief and a local charity respectively) rather than a stable commitment from local government, and had to fund-raise or 'beg and borrow' in order to put on particular events. This is despite the fact that they were clearly playing an extremely valuable role in the neighbourhoods, as many local officials recognised. However government funding regimes for community groups seem to continue to be characterised by small one-off grants or 'seed funding', even where wider policy initiatives are seeking to engage them in decision-making and even the delivery of policy objectives on a long-term basis.

Local government also seems to continue to be characterised by changes in personnel and management structures, which could undermine the relationships and connections formed between local people and officials. For example, in Stoke, spaces for such engagement were opened up by the council's 'facilitation service', which was then effectively dismantled. In particular, this shut down relationships within neighbourhoods with individual officers who were there as a first point of contact across a wide range of issues, and who could potentially act as advocates on behalf of local people in a wider sphere of decision-making.

The presence of these officers on an area basis seems to be a good model. Such relationships could also work to provide flexible support, which recognised the particular dynamics of localities and the need for ongoing negotiations around degrees of intervention and formality. In fact, besides from housing officers, in my fieldwork areas there was lack of long-term neighbourhood-based government personnel; youth workers or community development workers were non-existent or covered huge areas, or were there to work on specific projects, often time-limited by funding streams. Yet for the groups, individual relationships with officers, formed over time, seemed more important than particular structures of participation or engagement.

- **The spaces that matter:** When I began my research I had assumed that the 'public spaces' I would focus on would be streets, parks and other outdoor spaces. However, I came to realise that in terms of spaces of interaction and collective action, the most important spaces for the groups were probably indoors, centrally the community houses and buildings where they were based. I would therefore argue more broadly that in approaching public space within a locality there is a need to think widely about where and how publics might be formed, rather than focusing on certain kinds of spaces. This means considering all the spaces and places through which people might meet and develop senses of collectivity, from the local newspaper, to formal sites of local government participation, to the doorway of a corner shop. As I

discussed at the start of this chapter, such spaces should be understood as related to each other, so attempts to open up new kinds of spaces need to take this context into consideration.

More specifically, as I explored in Chapter Four, this context of neighbourhood spaces can suggest the kinds of potentials as well as limitations for public spaces within a locality. For example, despite its problematic nature, the shopping centre on Westfields was also understood by local residents as a place of positive sociability, of friendly connections, and this could have been built on through resources or support for other activities there. Indeed, sustained spaces where a range of local people could socialise together, such as community centres, cafes or youth clubs, were non-existent or substantially under-resourced in the areas where I did research. For example, on a neighbouring estate to Westfields there was a youth centre, but it had been effectively abandoned by official youth services and was run by volunteers from a community group.

In thinking through what kinds of spaces were productive and accessible for local people, I have drawn attention throughout the thesis to the importance of 'ordinary' shared material practices and forms of sociability in enabling negotiations and connections between different groups and subject positions. This suggests that practical activities, or informal sociable occasions and celebrations should be resourced as a way of supporting 'political' participation.

Indeed, as I have argued, such practices are not simply a precursor to other forms of engagement and interaction, but can be highly significant in their own right.

This ties in with valuing spaces which might be more conventionally thought of as linked to domestic or private lives. I have already noted the importance of spaces where people 'felt comfortable' or felt 'at home'. Activities and spaces in which there was a continuum between public and private realms of activity could also bring out the skills, resources and potentials of local people both individually and collectively. Indeed impulses around 'helping out', care and nurturing others were widespread in both neighbourhoods; apart from the ongoing work of the volunteers and committee members, many other local people would lend a hand when a big event was coming up or problems arose. These kinds of relationships and impulses should be recognised and valued by state interventions, which often still define 'participation' or forms of citizenship in very narrow terms.

In fact the atmosphere of formal spaces of political participation in the neighbourhoods tended to be in sharp contrast to the dynamics of energy and sociability generated by the groups' spaces. Such formal meetings were often experienced as exclusionary, yet a more creative and sensitive approach could have resulted in them being run in many different ways, whether in terms of the layout of

rooms, of venues, of how discussions were organised, or indeed the substance and focus of the meetings.

Nonetheless, as already emphasised, by themselves there is clearly a limit to what such meetings can achieve in terms of allowing local people to access power and resources. Indeed, as I have shown, conventional forms of political participation may also be caught up in established patterns and discourses of 'local politics', which can determine the nature of participation and interaction. Initiatives to promote such participation therefore need to be backed up by long-term, ongoing support within the neighbourhoods, as well as a stronger commitment to actually involving and listening to local people.

- **Recognising different groups:** As I have discussed throughout the thesis, in the context of the two neighbourhoods where I worked, fear and antagonism between generations could seriously undermine senses of collective life. Both community groups tried to take a long term and positive approach to working with different age groups. Crucially this meant recognising differing needs and demands, especially in giving young people senses of autonomy. For example, this involved giving them some control over certain spaces as well as in decision-making which affected their lives. Both groups also attempted to enable some negotiations and identifications across generations, through shared activities or spaces.

This was against the background of authoritarian, and often extremely negative, measures directed against young people through official responses, which could increase feelings of antagonism and disconnection across generations. In terms of policy interventions I would argue that there is pressing need for more creative, positive and nuanced approaches to tackling this issue, along the lines suggested by the work of the groups. This means thinking in terms of a caring, nurturing and holistic approach to young people's lives and concerns, which recognises the positive role that they can play within collective spaces. Whilst I have discussed some of the limitations and criticisms made around the 'Sure Start' programmes which target children under five, the idea of bringing together a range of services and interventions around the needs of an age group seems a model which might be adopted for teenagers too.

In terms of other forms of 'difference', I have indicated some of the potentials, but also difficulties for small community groups in connecting with groups from other localities, or whose members are from different backgrounds. I would suggest that there is clearly a role here for the local state in helping to facilitate such connections, in ways which would ultimately give such groups more power.

Overall, I hope I have demonstrated the importance and value of the kinds of spaces opened up by the work of small community groups. There is a need to recognise the expertise and skills that such groups accumulate through ongoing struggles to sustain such spaces, and to support, listen and learn from their experiences. This means paying attention to spaces of low-key and sometimes invisible forms of interaction and collective action, which might nonetheless constitute important public spaces. When politicians speak of the need to 'reinvigorate the public realm' (Blunkett 2003), they should begin by considering what is happening in the kinds of spaces explored here.

Appendix: fieldwork activity

DATES	RIVERLANDS	WESTFIELDS	INTERVIEWS AND CONTEXTUAL FIEDLWORK
June – September 2003	-Two visits: meeting group and establishing project		-Visits to other groups in London and Walsall. Day visiting Groundwork Stoke-on-Trent projects
October 2003	-Two sessions interviewing group members and group discussion		-Meetings with academics and outreach managers at Staffordshire University -Obtaining and reading local policy documents
November 2003	-Three sessions: lantern-making, group discussions with teenagers and with old folks	-Two initial visits to meet community groups near Westfields	-Further reading policy documents -Follow-up meeting with Groundwork -Meeting with Voluntary Action Stoke -Interview with senior parks official and visits to parks -Visit to community group in Canalside area
December 2003	-Attended lantern parade -Session with old folks -Visit to City Archives to read history and policy documents on Riverlands and East Town -Interview with community development worker on East Town		-Visit to community group in Canalside -Interview with community warden in Canalside -Attended North Staffordshire Urban Vision meeting -Attended consultation meeting on Housing Renewal Programme
January 2004	-Two drop-in sessions with group -Further visit to City Archives -Meeting with community workers in		-Visit to another community group in Canalside

	Riverlands -Discussion session with members of residents' group on East Town -Attended community forum meeting for Riverlands/East Town area		
February 2004	-Attended committee meeting -Two drop-in sessions -Spent day shadowing community wardens in Riverlands/East Town area -Interview with resident on East Town re SRB	-Initial meeting/discussion session with group -Attended open meeting	
March 2004	-Three sessions with group: cooking and two crafts -Attended committee meeting -Attended community forum meeting	-Meeting to establish project -Meeting with community development worker in Westfields	-Attended lecture by elected mayor
April 2004	-Two sessions: cooking and crafts	-Two office sessions	
May 2004	-Two allotment sessions -One arts and crafts session	-Attended emergency meeting re shopping centre -Attended open meeting -Two office sessions -Two discussion/brainstorming sessions with group for business plan	-Interview with community arts worker
June 2004	-Attended park opening party -Attended community arts day on East Town -Two allotment sessions	-Walkabout estate with residents -Attended committee meeting -One office session	
July 2004	-One allotment session -Interview with school outreach worker in Riverlands -One drop-in session -Two sessions helping at play scheme	-Two sessions helping at kids' club -One office/drop-in session	

August 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trip to theme park with teenagers - Two sessions helping at play scheme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview with community worker at centre near Westfields - One session making costumes for carnival - Training session for carnival - Worked as steward at Westfields Carnival - Interview with local area housing officer - Session helping at play scheme 	- Interview with elected mayor
September 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attended Annual General Meeting - One arts and crafts sessions - One beauty session with teenagers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attended Annual General Meeting - One session at kids club - One office/drop-in session 	
October 2004 – February 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accompanied teenagers on theatre trip - Research feedback session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Westfields community network and community forum meetings - One session at kids club - Worked at Westfields Christmas meal and party - Attended committee meeting - One office/drop-in session - Research feedback session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview with Sure Start worker - Interview with senior community involvement official

NOTES

- 'Sessions' with the Riverlands and Westfields groups refer to general participant observation with the groups. These were a mixture of helping with activities, working in the office (at Westfields) and just 'dropping in' to the community houses to chat to people and hang around. Where I did something more specific (like working at the Westfields carnival) I have listed this
- 'Discussion sessions' refer to more structured group discussions, arranged in advance and initiated by me
- Where I say 'attended' an event these tended to be meetings where I was in more of an observing role

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